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Impressions of Gaza

Noam Chomsky
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Even a single night in jail is enough to give a taste of what it means to be under the total control of some external force. And it hardly takes more than a day in Gaza to begin to appreciate what it must be like to try to survive in the world's largest open-air prison, where a million and a half people, in the most densely populated area of the world, are constantly subject to random and often savage terror and arbitrary punishment, with no purpose other than to humiliate and degrade, and with the further goal of ensuring that Palestinian hopes for a decent future will be crushed and that the overwhelming global support for a diplomatic settlement that will grant these rights will be nullified.

The intensity of this commitment on the part of the Israeli political leadership has been dramatically illustrated just in the past few days, as they warn that they will “go crazy” if Palestinian rights are given limited recognition at the UN. That is not a new departure. The threat to “go crazy” (“nishtagea”) is deeply rooted, back to the Labor governments of the 1950s, along with the related “Samson Complex”: we will bring down the Temple walls if crossed. It was an idle threat then; not today.

The purposeful humiliation is also not new, though it constantly takes new forms. Thirty years ago political leaders, including some of the most noted hawks, submitted to Prime Minister Begin a shocking and detailed account of how settlers regularly abuse Palestinians in the most depraved manner and with total impunity. The prominent military-political analyst Yoram Peri wrote with disgust that the army's task is not to defend the state, but “to demolish the rights of innocent people just because they are Araboushim (“niggers,” “kikes”) living in territories that God promised to us.”

Gazans have been selected for particularly cruel punishment. It is almost miraculous that

people can sustain such an existence. How they do so was described thirty years ago in an eloquent memoir by Raja Shehadeh (*The Third Way*), based on his work as a lawyer engaged in the hopeless task of trying to protect elementary rights within a legal system designed to ensure failure, and his personal experience as a *Samid*, “a steadfast one,” who watches his home turned into a prison by brutal occupiers and can do nothing but somehow “endure.”

Since Shehadeh wrote, the situation has become much worse. The Oslo agreements, celebrated with much pomp in 1993, determined that Gaza and the West Bank are a single territorial entity. By then the US and Israel had already initiated their program of separating them fully from one another, so as to block a diplomatic settlement and punish the Araboushim in both territories.

Punishment of Gazans became still more severe in January 2006, when they committed a major crime: they voted the “wrong way” in the first free election in the Arab world, electing Hamas. Demonstrating their passionate “yearning for democracy,” the US and Israel, backed by the timid European Union, at once imposed a brutal siege, along with intensive military attacks. The US also turned at once to standard operating procedure when some disobedient population elects the wrong government: prepare a military coup to restore order.

Gazans committed a still greater crime a year later by blocking the coup attempt, leading to a sharp escalation of the siege and military attacks. These culminated in winter 2008-9, with Operation Cast Lead, one of the most cowardly and vicious exercises of military force in recent memory, as a defenseless civilian population, trapped with no way to escape, was subjected to relentless attack by one of the world’s most advanced military systems relying on US arms and protected by US diplomacy. An unforgettable eyewitness account of the slaughter — “infanticide” in their words — is given by the two courageous Norwegian doctors who worked at Gaza’s main hospital during the merciless assault, Mads Gilbert and Erik Fosse, in their remarkable book *Eyes in Gaza*.

President-elect Obama was unable to say a word, apart from reiterating his heartfelt sympathy for children under attack — in the Israeli town Sderot. The carefully planned assault was brought to an end right before his inauguration, so that he could then say that now is the time to look forward, not backward, the standard refuge of criminals.

Of course, there were pretexts — there always are. The usual one, trotted out when needed, is “security”: in this case, home-made rockets from Gaza. As is commonly the case, the pretext lacked any credibility. In 2008 a truce was established between Israel and Hamas. The Israeli government formally recognizes that Hamas observed it fully. Not a single Hamas rocket was fired until Israel broke the truce under cover of the US election on November 4 2008, invading Gaza on ludicrous grounds and killing half a dozen Hamas members. The Israeli government was advised by its highest intelligence officials that the truce could be renewed by easing the criminal blockade and ending military attacks. But the government of Ehud Olmert, reputedly a dove, chose to reject these options, preferring to resort to its huge comparative advantage in violence: Operation Cast Lead. The basic facts are reviewed once again by foreign policy analyst Jerome Slater in the current issue of the Harvard-MIT journal

International Security.

The pattern of bombing under Cast Lead was carefully analyzed by the highly informed and internationally respected Gazan human rights advocate Raji Sourani. He points out that the bombing was concentrated in the north, targeting defenseless civilians in the most densely populated areas, with no possible military pretext. The goal, he suggests, may have been to drive the intimidated population to the south, near the Egyptian border. But the *Samidin* stayed put, despite the avalanche of US-Israeli terror.

A further goal might have been to drive them beyond. Back to the earliest days of the Zionist colonization it was argued across much of the spectrum that Arabs have no real reason to be in Palestine; they can be just as happy somewhere else, and should leave — politely “transferred,” the doves suggested. This is surely no small concern in Egypt, and perhaps a reason why Egypt does not open the border freely to civilians or even to desperately needed materials

Sourani and other knowledgeable sources observe that the discipline of the *Samidin* conceals a powder keg, which might explode any time, unexpectedly, as the first Intifada did in Gaza in 1989 after years of miserable repression that elicited no notice or concern,

Merely to mention one of innumerable cases, shortly before the outbreak of the Intifada a Palestinian girl, Intissar al-Atar, was shot and killed in a schoolyard by a resident of a nearby Jewish settlement. He was one of the several thousand Israelis settlers brought to Gaza in violation of international law and protected by a huge army presence, taking over much of the land and scarce water of the Strip and living “lavishly in twenty-two settlements in the midst of 1.4 million destitute Palestinians,” as the crime is described by Israeli scholar Avi Raz. The murderer of the schoolgirl, Shimon Yifrah, was arrested, but quickly released on bail when the Court determined that “the offense is not severe enough” to warrant detention. The judge commented that Yifrah only intended to shock the girl by firing his gun at her in a schoolyard, not to kill her, so “this is not a case of a criminal person who has to be punished, deterred, and taught a lesson by imprisoning him.” Yifrah was given a 7-month suspended sentence, while settlers in the courtroom broke out in song and dance. And the usual silence reigned. After all, it is routine.

And so it is. As Yifrah was freed, the Israeli press reported that an army patrol fired into the yard of a school for boys aged 6 to 12 in a West Bank refugee camp, wounding five children, allegedly intending only “to shock them.” There were no charges, and the event again attracted no attention. It was just another episode in the program of “illiteracy as punishment,” the Israeli press reported, including the closing of schools, use of gas bombs, beating of students with rifle butts, barring of medical aid for victims; and beyond the schools a reign of more severe brutality, becoming even more savage during the Intifada, under the orders of Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin, another admired dove.

My initial impression, after a visit of several days, was amazement, not only at the ability to go on with life, but also at the vibrancy and vitality among young people, particularly at the university, where I spent much of my time at an international conference. But there too one

can detect signs that the pressure may become too hard to bear. Reports indicate that among young men there is simmering frustration, recognition that under the US-Israeli occupation the future holds nothing for them. There is only so much that caged animals can endure, and there may be an eruption, perhaps taking ugly forms — offering an opportunity for Israeli and western apologists to self-righteously condemn the people who are culturally backward, as Mitt Romney insightfully explained.

Gaza has the look of a typical third world society, with pockets of wealth surrounded by hideous poverty. It is not, however, “undeveloped.” Rather it is “de-developed,” and very systematically so, to borrow the terms of Sara Roy, the leading academic specialist on Gaza. The Gaza Strip could have become a prosperous Mediterranean region, with rich agriculture and a flourishing fishing industry, marvelous beaches and, as discovered a decade ago, good prospects for extensive natural gas supplies within its territorial waters.

By coincidence or not, that is when Israel intensified its naval blockade, driving fishing boats toward shore, by now to 3 miles or less.

The favorable prospects were aborted in 1948, when the Strip had to absorb a flood of Palestinian refugees who fled in terror or were forcefully expelled from what became Israel, in some cases expelled months after the formal cease-fire.

In fact, they were being expelled even four years later, as reported in *Ha'aretz* (25.12.2008), in a thoughtful study by Beni Tziper on the history of Israeli Ashkelon back to the Canaanites. In 1953, he reports, there was a “cool calculation that it was necessary to cleanse the region of Arabs.” The original name, Majdal, had already been “Judaized” to today’s Ashkelon, regular practice.

That was in 1953, when there was no hint of military necessity. Tziper himself was born in 1953, and while walking in the remnants of the old Arab sector, he reflects that “it is really difficult for me, really difficult, to realize that while my parents were celebrating my birth, other people were being loaded on trucks and expelled from their homes.”

Israel’s 1967 conquests and their aftermath administered further blows. Then came the terrible crimes already mentioned, continuing to the present day.

The signs are easy to see, even on a brief visit. Sitting in a hotel near the shore, one can hear the machine gun fire of Israeli gunboats driving fishermen out of Gaza’s territorial waters and towards shore, so they are compelled to fish in waters that are heavily polluted because of US-Israeli refusal to allow reconstruction of the sewage and power systems that they destroyed.

The Oslo Accords laid plans for two desalination plants, a necessity in this arid region. One, an advanced facility, was built: in Israel. The second one is in Khan Yunis, in the south of Gaza. The engineer in charge of trying to obtain potable water for the population explained that this plant was designed so that it cannot use sea water, but must rely on underground water, a cheaper process, which further degrades the meager aquifer, guaranteeing severe

problems in the future. Even with that, water is severely limited. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), which cares for refugees (but not other Gazans), recently released a report warning that damage to the aquifer may soon become “irreversible,” and that without remedial action quickly, by 2020 Gaza may not be a “liveable place.”

Israel permits concrete to enter for UNRWA projects, but not for Gazans engaged in the huge reconstruction needs. The limited heavy equipment mostly lies idle, since Israel does not permit materials for repair. All of this is part of the general program described by Israeli official Dov Weisglass, an adviser to Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, after Palestinians failed to follow orders in the 2006 elections: “The idea,” he said, “is to put the Palestinians on a diet, but not to make them die of hunger.” That would not look good.

And the plan is being scrupulously followed. Sara Roy has provided extensive evidence in her scholarly studies. Recently, after several years of effort, the Israeli human rights organization Gisha succeeded to obtain a court order for the government to release its records detailing plans for the diet, and how they are executed. Israel-based journalist Jonathan Cook summarizes them: “Health officials provided calculations of the minimum number of calories needed by Gaza’s 1.5 million inhabitants to avoid malnutrition. Those figures were then translated into truckloads of food Israel was supposed to allow in each day ... an average of only 67 trucks — much less than half of the minimum requirement — entered Gaza daily. This compared to more than 400 trucks before the blockade began.” And even this estimate is overly generous, UN relief officials report.

The result of imposing the diet, Mideast scholar Juan Cole observes, is that “[a]bout ten percent of Palestinian children in Gaza under 5 have had their growth stunted by malnutrition ... in addition, anemia is widespread, affecting over two-thirds of infants, 58.6 percent of schoolchildren, and over a third of pregnant mothers.” The US and Israel want to ensure that nothing more than bare survival is possible.

“What has to be kept in mind,” observes Raji Sourani, “is that the occupation and the absolute closure is an ongoing attack on the human dignity of the people in Gaza in particular and all Palestinians generally. It is systematic degradation, humiliation, isolation and fragmentation of the Palestinian people.” The conclusion is confirmed by many other sources. In one of the world’s leading medical journals, *The Lancet*, a visiting Stanford physician, appalled by what he witnessed, describes Gaza as “something of a laboratory for observing an absence of dignity,” a condition that has “devastating” effects on physical, mental, and social wellbeing. “The constant surveillance from the sky, collective punishment through blockade and isolation, the intrusion into homes and communications, and restrictions on those trying to travel, or marry, or work make it difficult to live a dignified life in Gaza.” The Araboushim must be taught not to raise their heads.

There were hopes that the new Morsi government in Egypt, less in thrall to Israel than the western-backed Mubarak dictatorship, might open the Rafah crossing, the sole access to the outside for trapped Gazans that is not subject to direct Israeli control. There has been slight opening, but not much. Journalist Laila el-Haddad writes that the re-opening under Morsi, “is simply a return to status quo of years past: only Palestinians carrying an Israeli-approved

Gaza ID card can use Rafah Crossing,” excluding a great many Palestinians, including el-Haddad’s family, where only one spouse has a card.

Furthermore, she continues, “the crossing does not lead to the West Bank, nor does it allow for the passage of goods, which are restricted to the Israeli-controlled crossings and subject to prohibitions on construction materials and export.” The restricted Rafah crossing does not change the fact that “Gaza remains under tight maritime and aerial siege, and continues to be closed off to the Palestinians’ cultural, economic, and academic capitals in the rest of the [occupied territories], in violation of US-Israeli obligations under the Oslo Accords.”

The effects are painfully evident. In the Khan Yunis hospital, the director, who is also chief of surgery, describes with anger and passion how even medicines are lacking for relief of suffering patients, as well as simple surgical equipment, leaving doctors helpless and patients in agony. Personal stories add vivid texture to the general disgust one feels at the obscenity of the harsh occupation. One example is the testimony of a young woman who despaired that her father, who would have been proud that she was the first woman in the refugee camp to gain an advanced degree, had “passed away after 6 months of fighting cancer aged 60 years. Israeli occupation denied him a permit to go to Israeli hospitals for treatment. I had to suspend my study, work and life and go to set next to his bed. We all sat including my brother the physician and my sister the pharmacist, all powerless and hopeless watching his suffering. He died during the inhumane blockade of Gaza in summer 2006 with very little access to health service. I think feeling powerless and hopeless is the most killing feeling that human can ever have. It kills the spirit and breaks the heart. You can fight occupation but you cannot fight your feeling of being powerless. You can't even dissolve that feeling.”

Disgust at the obscenity, compounded with guilt: it is within our power to bring the suffering to an end and allow the *Samidin* to enjoy the lives of peace and dignity that they deserve.