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The Killings Fields of Gaza

Asymmetric Warfare

by COLIN GREEN

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Revelations from Israeli sources such as ‘Breaking the Silence’ and ‘Physicians for Human Rights-Israel’ that the Israeli assaults on Gaza in 2008/9 (Cast Lead) and 2012 (Pillars of Defence) were planned many months ahead pose many questions about the real motives for the seven year siege and these massive attacks on a helpless concentration of impoverished and imprisoned people. Let us then pose just some of those questions and seek objective answers to:

*Why does the international community and UN allow Israel to blockade and besiege a tiny strip of land called Gaza for near seven years with absolute impunity?

*In a related vein, why is Israel allowed to commit piracy in international waters to prevent unarmed merchant ships reaching Gaza under the nose of NATO naval fleets operating in the Eastern Mediterranean?

*Were the asymmetric assaults on Gaza in 2008/9 and again in 2012 genuinely a response to Qassam rocket attacks or carefully planned attacks for other reasons?

*Could the siege and attacks actually be about testing of new weapons, testing of new missile defence systems, field trials of new strategies of population control and control of the immense energy resources found in the Eastern Mediterranean?

Let's begin by examining the demographics obtaining at the time of the Cast Lead assault. Gaza is a narrow strip of land, 45 km long by 5-12 km wide, into which 1.5 million Palestinians were concentrated and virtually imprisoned – at a density of 4119/km², four times the density of Bangladesh. The population is confined mainly to five cities and seven large refugee camps, with one million people registered as UN refugees. There is only about 24 km² of potentially productive farmland, the best of it adjacent to the north-eastern border with Israel, most of it inaccessible because it falls within the Israeli 'buffer zone.' Eighty percent of Gazans, 59% of whom are children, live below the poverty line. Forty percent are unemployed, 60% are food dependent on UNRWA.

Gaza had been ruled by Hamas, a freely elected government, for over a year before the attacks, but Israel and the US designated it a 'terrorist organisation' and Gaza a 'hostile entity' soon after those elections, and then set out to make life hell for its citizens. From 2006 onward, Israel set out to destroy the Gazan economy, using food insecurity, a kind of controlled starvation, as a means of punishing the population and breaking its will.

The buffer zone inside the border removed 68% of arable farmland, making farming dangerous and impossible. Available fish stocks were reduced by 84%, Palestinian fishermen limited by Israel to three instead of the 20 nautical miles agreed upon in the Oslo process, thus reducing protein intake to dangerous levels and destroying one of the bases of the Gazan economy. No less telling is that by limiting Palestinian access to the sea the Israelis have also prevented Gazan exploitation of natural gas reserves of Gaza Marine 1 and 2 estimated at nearly 1.4 trillion cubic feet, which could have turned the economy around and made Gaza energy independent of Israel.

Analysis of the timelines of both major military assaults is instructive. For six months leading up to the Cast Lead invasion, Hamas observed a ceasefire until an Israeli incursion into Gaza on November 4th (election day in the US) killed six Palestinians, predictably triggering a response of Qassam rocket fire into Israel. This provided just the pretext needed by the Israeli military to attack on a massive scale.

The Israeli attack commenced on December 27, 2008, carefully coordinated to coincide with the changeover in American Presidencies. After three days of intensive air strikes, the Security Council attempted to pass Ceasefire Resolution 1860, but the US blocked it, giving Israel the political space it needed to launch a full ground assault. (Congress supported the invasion overwhelmingly, the House by a vote of 390-5, the Senate by an overwhelming bi-partisan voice vote.)

The Ceasefire Resolution was finally passed by the Security Council on January 8th, almost a week after the ground invasion, but the US abstained, thereby affording Israel the necessary political cover to continue its operations. US President-elect Barack Obama uttered not a word. Tony Blair, the Quartet representative, issued a tepid call for an immediate ceasefire.

Palestinian casualties in the Cast Lead invasion were appalling. About 1400 people were killed, of which 313 were children and 116 were women; less than 20% of those killed were combatants. More than 6000 were badly injured, including 1855 children and 795 women (source: Palestinian Center for Human Rights). My Norwegian medical colleagues Mads Gilbert and Eric Fosse, working in Gaza at the time alongside Palestinian medical staff, reported lesions which they had never seen before and which provided circumstantial evidence that the Israelis had used and tested new weapons as well as white phosphorus in heavily populated civilian areas. Apart from severe burns, there were an abnormally high number of amputations and maiming among the surviving wounded.

For example, 150 amputees had to be referred to Egyptian hospitals; in Jabalia refugee camp there were 165 newly disabled patients of whom at least 90 had amputations, some multiple. These casualties were caused by the full armamentarium of known conventional weapons, but some injuries caused strongly suggest that other ordnance was tested for the first time under battle conditions. Some of these described here were definitely used but others are still in doubt.

White phosphorous shells contain the chemical impregnated into small strips of felt, which scatter over a radius of 100 metres when the shell explodes in mid-air. It is officially used as a smoke-screen device and for illumination at night, but it is also an incendiary device and was used as such in Gaza on several occasions. Flechette shells contain thousands of darts about 4 cm long which disperse in a widening cone when the shell explodes about a metre from the ground; these darts are ballistically designed to tumble on penetration and wreak havoc in soft tissues. They were used in 2008/9 but not in the 2012 assault.

The Keshet rapid fire automated mortar was tried out to devastating effect in a crowded street in Jabalia Refugee camp near the Al Fakhoura School, in full view of the Israeli troops. Kalanit shells were fired from 120mm tank cannons; these explode in the air, stop and release 6 mini-charges which spray a target with shrapnel from above.

Dense inert metal explosives (DIMES) are newly developed ordnance comprising a carbon fibre casing packed with micro-shrapnel of inert metals like tungsten, nickel and cobalt causing a massive implosion within a relatively confined space, supposedly allowing a precise kill without collateral damage over a wide area. Small diameter bombs (SDBs) which glide toward their target under laser direction can be fitted to F16 fighter aircraft, and were used in Gaza (1000 were purchased from the US in early December in readiness for the 2008 attack).

It is thought that they contained dense inert metal shrapnel. However the evidence for the use of DIMES is based on the powdered shrapnel found over the liver surface and other soft tissues, as well as the clean-cut multiple amputations suffered by so many casualties; it is not definitive.

Depleted uranium tipped shells are designed for deep penetration of targets such as tanks and create a high temperature fireball inside; in Gaza they were used to attack large buildings, not tanks. Finally although the Israelis have been accused of using thermobaric weapons in Gaza as bunker busters targeting the Egyptian border tunnels, there is no clear evidence for that.

Operation Cast Lead was a supreme example of asymmetric warfare between, on the one hand, the most powerful military state in the Middle East and, on the other, a besieged concentration camp. To give you an idea of the military might of this prototypic modern warrior state, Israel has at the last count between 240 and 300 nuclear warheads; huge stockpiles of chemical and biological weapons of mass destruction (yet calling indignantly for the destruction of all in Syria); 620 warplanes including F16 fighters (soon to be replaced with the latest F35 lightning fighters costing \$200 million each, 25 of which promised by the US to Israel ahead of all other recipients as they come off the production line), as well as Cobra and Apache helicopters; six German-built and donated Dolphin Class submarines, some capable of being armed with nuclear warheads and two thought to be currently operational in the Persian Gulf; an unknown number of short, intermediate and long range (up to 8000 kilometres) ballistic missiles capable of delivering a nuclear payload (Jericho1,2,3); a modern navy of 58 combat surface warships many armed with missiles which regularly exercises with the NATO Fleet in the Mediterranean; three squadrons of drones (Hermes, Searcher and Heron), many designed and built in Israel with 100 on order by the UK Government; a highly trained army with 2442 heavy Merkava tanks, 1265

armoured troop carriers and numerous other smaller military vehicles; 2754 pieces of heavy artillery with diabolical ordnance specifically designed to create havoc in civilian populations; and a standing army of 26,000 bolstered by 107,000 conscripts to a total of 133,000 troops (60% bigger than the British Army) which can be rapidly expanded nearly 3-fold in emergency with 400,000 personnel who have been trained for mandatory periods each year of their life from 18 up to the age of 40-50.

Think back to the size of that total population of 7.8 million Israelis, of which at least 20% are ineligible to join the armed forces because they are regarded as a Fifth Column of Israeli Arabs. This represents a massive investment in war both in blood and in money. How much does all this cost? Officially, Israel says it spends roughly 7% of total GDP (\$265 billion) on the military (as compared with 4.5% US and 2.5% UK). Once a tiny state like Israel commits itself to such a massive proportion of its GDP for war, the only way to pay for it is through economies of scale, an indigenous arms development programme, partly for domestic use by the IDF and partly for sale.

Based on their 2012/13 sales (\$13 billion), it lies 4th in the world league table (UK 3rd with \$19 billion in sales). If you factor in, however, Israel's homeland security trade (perhaps as much as its arms trade, whose goods have been honed over decades of control over the Palestinians), such profitable enterprises as retrofitting and its largely unreported arms trade through the shadow world of arms dealers, its global reach and profits place it among the leading arms and security exporters. The Israeli arms and homeland security industry has certainly made its mark both in hardware weaponry (particularly drones), in IT (avionics, robotics, other forms of electronic warfare, plus the military applications of nanotechnology) and in cyber warfare (where IDF Unit 8200 works closely with the NSA), plus myriad forms of security-for-hire. Labelling their products "Field-tested" or "Combat-proven in Gaza" gives Israeli weapons manufacturers a key edge in the market.

Besides unquestioning bi-partisan support for Israel in Congress for domestic reasons, are there other interests at work that explain why the US routinely vetoes in the Security Council any and every UN resolution critical of Israel (43 times so far, more than all other countries have used their veto on all other issues combined)? Could the ability of the Pentagon and American (and European) arms manufacturers to test their new weaponry in Gaza and the West Bank offer an explanation?

The immediate connection between American financial support of the Israeli anti-missile defence system Iron Dome, its use against Qassam rockets whose firing Israel actually provoked and announcements that the system is being sold to American forces in Afghanistan and to India has to raise questions. Similarly, could a demonstration of “aerial occupation” in which drones completely dominate, intimidate and control the lives of 1.7 million people in Gaza have any effect on Israeli sales of drones as part of its larger export of means of control to governments, armies, security agencies, and police forces around the world? And what about the massive natural gas fields off-shore from Gaza being exploited by Israel while the Palestinians are denied access to their own natural resources through supposed “security” controls?

Israel’s armoury serves as the ultimate extension of Western hegemony in the region. That and the Western military-security-industrial complex being served by Israeli weapons and the opportunity to develop and test weapons in the Palestinian Territories makes the assaults on Gaza and the ongoing repression a case study in what is rapidly becoming Global Palestine – the “palestinization” of us all. For the Gazans are only the guinea pigs. We are the end-recipients. In that sense we all are, truly, Palestinians.