

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نښاند تن من مباد بدین بوم ویر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

لسان های اروپایی

<http://www.amconmag.com/article/2009/jan/26/00006/>

Another War, Another Defeat

The Gaza offensive has succeeded in punishing the Palestinians but not in making Israel more secure.

John J. Mearsheimer

Israelis and their American supporters claim that Israel learned its lessons well from the disastrous 2006 Lebanon war and has devised a winning strategy for the present war against Hamas. Of course, when a ceasefire comes, Israel will declare victory. Don't believe it. Israel has foolishly started another war it cannot win.

The campaign in Gaza is said to have two objectives: 1) to put an end to the rockets and mortars that Palestinians have been firing into southern Israel since it withdrew from Gaza in August 2005; 2) to restore Israel's deterrent, which was said to be diminished by the Lebanon fiasco, by Israel's withdrawal from Gaza, and by its inability to halt Iran's nuclear program.

But these are not the real goals of Operation Cast Lead. The actual purpose is connected to Israel's long-term vision of how it intends to live with millions of Palestinians in its midst. It is part of a broader strategic goal: the creation of a "Greater Israel." Specifically, Israel's leaders remain determined to control all of what used to be known as Mandate Palestine, which includes Gaza and the West Bank. The Palestinians would have limited autonomy in a handful of disconnected and economically crippled enclaves, one of which is Gaza. Israel would control the borders around them, movement between them, the air above and the water below them.

The key to achieving this is to inflict massive pain on the Palestinians so that they come to accept the fact that they are a defeated people and that Israel will be largely responsible for controlling their future. This strategy, which was first articulated by Ze'ev Jabotinsky in the 1920s and has heavily influenced Israeli policy since 1948, is commonly referred to as the "Iron Wall."

What has been happening in Gaza is fully consistent with this strategy.

Let's begin with Israel's decision to withdraw from Gaza in 2005. The conventional wisdom is that Israel was serious about making peace with the Palestinians and that its leaders hoped the exit from Gaza would be a major step toward creating a viable Palestinian state. According to the *New York Times*' Thomas L. Friedman, Israel was giving the Palestinians an opportunity to "build a decent mini-state there—a Dubai on the Mediterranean," and if they did so, it would "fundamentally reshape the Israeli debate about whether the Palestinians can be handed most of the West Bank."

This is pure fiction. Even before Hamas came to power, the Israelis intended to create an open-air prison for the Palestinians in Gaza and inflict great pain on them until they complied with Israel's wishes. Dov Weisglass, Ariel Sharon's closest adviser at the time, candidly stated that the disengagement from Gaza was aimed at halting the peace process, not encouraging it. He described the disengagement as "formaldehyde that's necessary so that there will not be a political process with the Palestinians." Moreover, he emphasized that the withdrawal "places the Palestinians under tremendous pressure. It forces them into a corner where they hate to be."

Arnon Soffer, a prominent Israeli demographer who also advised Sharon, elaborated on what that pressure would look like. "When 2.5 million people live in a closed-off Gaza, it's going to be a human catastrophe. Those people will become even bigger animals than they are today, with the aid of an insane fundamentalist Islam. The pressure at the border will be awful. It's going to be a terrible war. So, if we want to remain alive, we will have to kill and kill and kill. All day, every day."

In January 2006, five months after the Israelis pulled their settlers out of Gaza, Hamas won a decisive victory over Fatah in the Palestinian legislative elections. This meant trouble for Israel's strategy because Hamas was democratically elected, well organized, not corrupt like Fatah, and unwilling to accept Israel's existence. Israel responded by ratcheting up economic pressure on the Palestinians, but it did not work. In fact, the situation took another turn for the worse in March 2007, when Fatah and Hamas came together to form a national unity government. Hamas's stature and political power were growing, and Israel's divide-and-conquer strategy was unraveling.

To make matters worse, the national unity government began pushing for a long-term ceasefire. The Palestinians would end all missile attacks on Israel if the Israelis would stop arresting and assassinating Palestinians and end their economic stranglehold, opening the border crossings into Gaza.

Israel rejected that offer and with American backing set out to foment a civil war between Fatah and Hamas that would wreck the national unity government and put Fatah in charge. The plan backfired when Hamas drove Fatah out of Gaza, leaving Hamas in charge there and the more pliant Fatah in control of the West Bank. Israel then tightened the screws on the blockade around Gaza, causing even greater hardship and suffering among the Palestinians living there.

Hamas responded by continuing to fire rockets and mortars into Israel, while emphasizing that they still sought a long-term ceasefire, perhaps lasting ten years or more. This was not a noble gesture on Hamas's part: they sought a ceasefire because the balance of power heavily favored Israel. The Israelis had no interest in a ceasefire and merely intensified the economic pressure on Gaza. But in the late spring of 2008, pressure from Israelis living under the rocket attacks led the government to agree to a six-month ceasefire starting on June 19. That agreement, which formally ended on Dec. 19, immediately preceded the present war, which began on Dec. 27.

The official Israeli position blames Hamas for undermining the ceasefire. This view is widely accepted in the United States, but it is not true. Israeli leaders disliked the ceasefire from the start, and Defense Minister Ehud Barak instructed the IDF to begin preparing for the present war while the ceasefire was being negotiated in June 2008. Furthermore, Dan Gillerman, Israel's former ambassador to the UN, reports that Jerusalem began to prepare the propaganda campaign to sell the present war months before the conflict began. For its part, Hamas drastically reduced the number of missile attacks during the first five months of the ceasefire. A total of two rockets were fired into Israel during September and October, none by Hamas.

How did Israel behave during this same period? It continued arresting and assassinating Palestinians on the West Bank, and it continued the deadly blockade that was slowly strangling Gaza. Then on Nov. 4, as Americans voted for a new president, Israel attacked a tunnel inside Gaza and killed six Palestinians. It was the first major violation of the ceasefire, and the Palestinians—who had been “careful to maintain the ceasefire,” according to Israel's Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center—responded by resuming rocket attacks. The calm that had prevailed since June vanished as Israel ratcheted up the blockade and its attacks into Gaza and the Palestinians hurled more rockets at Israel. It is worth noting that not a single Israeli was killed by Palestinian missiles between Nov. 4 and the launching of the war on Dec. 27.

As the violence increased, Hamas made clear that it had no interest in extending the ceasefire beyond Dec. 19, which is hardly surprising, since it had not worked as intended. In mid-December, however, Hamas informed Israel that it was still willing to negotiate a long-term ceasefire if it included an end to the arrests and assassinations as well as the lifting of the blockade. But the Israelis, having used the ceasefire to prepare for war against Hamas, rejected this overture. The bombing of Gaza commenced eight days after the failed ceasefire formally ended.

If Israel wanted to stop missile attacks from Gaza, it could have done so by arranging a long-term ceasefire with Hamas. And if Israel were genuinely interested in creating a viable Palestinian state, it could have worked with the national unity government to implement a meaningful ceasefire and change Hamas's thinking about a two-state solution. But Israel has a different agenda: it is determined to employ the Iron Wall strategy to get the Palestinians in Gaza to accept their fate as hapless subjects of a Greater Israel.

This brutal policy is clearly reflected in Israel's conduct of the Gaza War. Israel and its supporters claim that the IDF is going to great lengths to avoid civilian casualties, in some cases taking risks that put Israeli soldiers in jeopardy. Hardly. One reason to doubt these claims is that Israel refuses to allow reporters into the war zone: it does not want the world to see what its soldiers and bombs are doing inside Gaza. At the same time, Israel has launched a massive propaganda campaign to put a positive spin on the horror stories that do emerge.

The best evidence, however, that Israel is deliberately seeking to punish the broader population in Gaza is the death and destruction the IDF has wrought on that small piece of real estate. Israel has killed over 1,000 Palestinians and wounded more than 4,000. Over half of the casualties are civilians, and many are children. The IDF's opening salvo on Dec. 27 took place as children were leaving school, and one of its primary targets that day was a large group of graduating police cadets, who hardly qualified as terrorists. In what Ehud Barak called "an all-out war against Hamas," Israel has targeted a university, schools, mosques, homes, apartment buildings, government offices, and even ambulances. A senior Israeli military official, speaking on the condition of anonymity, explained the logic behind Israel's expansive target set: "There are many aspects of Hamas, and we are trying to hit the whole spectrum, because everything is connected and everything supports terrorism against Israel." In other words, everyone is a terrorist and everything is a legitimate target.

Israelis tend to be blunt, and they occasionally say what they are really doing. After the IDF killed 40 Palestinian civilians in a UN school on Jan. 6, *Ha'aretz* reported that "senior officers admit that the IDF has been using enormous firepower." One officer explained, "For us, being cautious means being aggressive. From the minute we entered, we've acted like we're at war. That creates enormous damage on the ground ... I just hope those who have fled the area of Gaza City in which we are operating will describe the shock."

One might accept that Israel is waging "a cruel, all-out war against 1.5 million Palestinian civilians," as *Ha'aretz* put it in an editorial, but argue that it will eventually achieve its war aims and the rest of the world will quickly forget the horrors inflicted on the people of Gaza.

This is wishful thinking. For starters, Israel is unlikely to stop the rocket fire for any appreciable period of time unless it agrees to open Gaza's borders and stop arresting and killing Palestinians. Israelis talk about cutting off the supply of rockets and mortars into Gaza, but weapons will continue to come in via secret tunnels and ships that sneak through Israel's naval blockade. It will also be impossible to police all of the goods sent into Gaza through legitimate channels.

Israel could try to conquer all of Gaza and lock the place down. That would probably stop the rocket attacks if Israel deployed a large enough force. But then the IDF would be bogged down in a costly occupation against a deeply hostile population. They would eventually have to leave, and the rocket fire would resume. And if Israel fails to stop the

rocket fire and keep it stopped, as seems likely, its deterrent will be diminished, not strengthened.

More importantly, there is little reason to think that the Israelis can beat Hamas into submission and get the Palestinians to live quietly in a handful of Bantustans inside Greater Israel. Israel has been humiliating, torturing, and killing Palestinians in the Occupied Territories since 1967 and has not come close to cowing them. Indeed, Hamas's reaction to Israel's brutality seems to lend credence to Nietzsche's remark that what does not kill you makes you stronger.

But even if the unexpected happens and the Palestinians cave, Israel would still lose because it will become an apartheid state. As Prime Minister Ehud Olmert recently said, Israel will "face a South African-style struggle" if the Palestinians do not get a viable state of their own. "As soon as that happens," he argued, "the state of Israel is finished." Yet Olmert has done nothing to stop settlement expansion and create a viable Palestinian state, relying instead on the Iron Wall strategy to deal with the Palestinians.

There is also little chance that people around the world who follow the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will soon forget the appalling punishment that Israel is meting out in Gaza. The destruction is just too obvious to miss, and too many people—especially in the Arab and Islamic world—care about the Palestinians' fate. Moreover, discourse about this longstanding conflict has undergone a sea change in the West in recent years, and many of us who were once wholly sympathetic to Israel now see that the Israelis are the victimizers and the Palestinians are the victims. What is happening in Gaza will accelerate that changing picture of the conflict and long be seen as a dark stain on Israel's reputation.

The bottom line is that no matter what happens on the battlefield, Israel cannot win its war in Gaza. In fact, it is pursuing a strategy—with lots of help from its so-called friends in the Diaspora—that is placing its long-term future at risk.