

“Gaza’s Agony: An Alternative Perspective on Recent Events”: *Humanist Perspectives*: Spring 2015

Introduction: Historical Context Missing

The corporate media has largely ignored the horrific living conditions in Gaza that have been gradually intensified since Israel officially left the territory in 2005. While the reasons for such blinkered journalism are beyond the scope of this article, both the scope and consistency of the phenomenon are worthy of careful analysis. Considering the current state of affairs in Gaza; this absence of historical context creates the false impression that Palestinians are innately violent and self-destructive.

Former Israeli leader Ariel Sharon cynically agreed to abandon Gaza to the Palestinians in 2005 although the move was presented to the world as a magnanimous gesture. As senior Sharon advisor Dov Weissglass said to a *Haaretz* reporter in 2004:

The significance of the disengagement plan is the freezing of the peace process...And when you freeze that process, you prevent the establishment of a Palestinian state, and you prevent a discussion on the refugees, the borders and Jerusalem. Effectively, this whole package called the Palestinian state, with all that it entails, has been removed from our agenda. (Rabbani, 2014)

Since the Palestinian leadership must have been aware of this attitude; their tendency to cynicism and mistrust in dealing with a peace partner so vastly superior in arms, finance and super power backing is understandable.

The Western public needs more accurate information about the punitive conditions Gaza residents endure and how that might explain the rise of a brutal organization like Hamas. While little is said about the highly-effective pre-1948 Jewish terrorism campaign in Palestine; reference to those past events might provide much-needed context for the current activities of Hamas and other Palestinian militant groups who attack Israel with suicide bombers, mortars and crude rockets.

Assumptions about the Cause of the Recent Violence in Gaza: A Limited Retrospective

Canada’s corporate media continues to provide propaganda services to the Israeli state by presented recent events as a noble and measured Israeli response to the terrorists of Hamas. According to the August 22, 2014 *Associated Press* article in the *Globe and Mail*:

, “...the [Hamas] kidnapping of three Israeli teens while they were hitchhiking on June 12, along with the discovery of their bodies two weeks later, sparked a broad Israeli crackdown on Hamas members in the West Bank, Hamas responded with heavy rocket fire out of the Gaza strip, leading Israel to launch an aerial and ground invasion of the territory. (*Associated Press*, 2014)

The July 21, 2014 issue of *MacLeans* magazine echoed this condemnation of Hamas by declaring, “Israel launched air strikes in the Gaza Strip in retaliation for Palestinian rocket

attacks on Israeli towns; escalation seems inevitable..." (Macleans, 2014) *Sun Media* offered the following critique of Liberal candidate and former Canadian general Andrew Leslie who dared hold the Israeli military accountable for civilian casualties in Gaza: "No mention that Hamas started the conflict by murdering three Israeli students. No mention that Hamas uses civilians as human shields when firing rockets at Israel, or that it tells civilians to ignore Israeli warnings of an imminent attack." (*Sun Media*: 2014)

They omitted the fact that Gaza is so crowded that it is nearly impossible to perform any military activity without some proximity to civilians. As for Israeli warnings, Gaza Palestinians have nowhere to hide as the bombs and missiles explode around them. Perhaps Hamas rocket attacks on Israel will be less offensive if they adopt an Israeli-style early warning system. Notably absent from the pages and airwaves of the corporate media is any mention of what could be considered the deeper reasons for the recent spate of Hamas rocket attacks.

### Israeli Violation of 2012 Ceasefire Agreement

Contrary to corporate media reports, the Israeli Defense force (IDF) began immediately violating the ceasefire agreement that followed Operation Pillar of Defense, the 2012 invasion of Gaza. In commenting on the violation, Noam Chomsky refers to the work of Nathan Thrall, senior Middle East analyst of the International Crisis Group:

Israeli intelligence recognized that Hamas was observing the terms of the ceasefire. "Israel," Thrall wrote, "therefore saw little incentive in upholding its end of the deal. In the three months following the ceasefire, its forces made regular incursions into Gaza, strafed Palestinian farmers and those collecting scrap and rubble across the border, and fired at boats, preventing fishermen from accessing the majority of Gaza's waters." In other words, the siege never ended. (Chomsky, 2014)

Therefore, July 2014's Operation Protective Edge was almost inevitable, as Chomsky notes:

So matters continued until April 2014, when an important event took place. The two major Palestinian groupings, Gaza-based Hamas and the Fatah-dominated Palestinian Authority in the West Bank signed a unity agreement. Finally, the unity government accepted the three conditions that Washington and the European Union had long demanded: non-violence, adherence to past agreements, and the recognition of Israel. Israel was infuriated. (*Ibid.*)

As well, the IDF's July 2014 attack was preceded by another Israeli action in April that further exacerbated existing tensions. As Moun Rabbani wrote in the *London Review of Books*, "Negotiations that had been going on for nine months stalled after the Israeli government reneged on its commitment to release a number of Palestinian prisoners, incarcerated since before the 1993 Oslo Accords..." (Rabbani: 2014) The Netanyahu regime felt it could not risk being seen as too conciliatory with an election looming and again; these developments were notably absent in corporate media coverage of the July, 2014 violence.

There are good reasons why The Israeli state utterly opposes any unification of Palestinian factions.

One is that the Hamas-Fatah conflict has provided a useful pretext for refusing to engage in serious negotiations. How can one negotiate with a divided entity? More significantly, for more than 20 years, Israel has been committed to separating Gaza from the West Bank in violation of the Oslo Accords it signed in 1993, which declare Gaza and the West Bank to be an inseparable territorial unity. (*Ibid.*)

Such unification would seriously interfere with Israeli plans to dominate the West Bank and isolate existing Palestinian enclaves as current maps indicate. These plans bode ill for the prospects on a viable Palestinian state.

Separated from Gaza, any West Bank enclaves left to Palestinians have no access to the outside world. They are contained by two hostile powers, Israel and Jordan, both close U.S. allies... Furthermore, Israel has been systematically taking over the Jordan Valley, driving out Palestinians, establishing settlements, sinking wells, and otherwise ensuring that the region -- about one-third of the West Bank, with much of its arable land -- will ultimately be integrated into Israel along with the other regions that country is taking over. (*Ibid.*)

The IDF required a pretext for Operation Protective Edge and, "Such an occasion arose when three Israeli boys from the settler community in the West Bank were brutally murdered. The Israeli government evidently quickly realized that they were dead, but pretended otherwise, which provided the opportunity to launch a "rescue operation" (*Ibid.*)...and the ensuing invasion of Gaza. The pattern is well-established but unremarked in the pages of publications like the *Globe and Mail* or the *National Post*.

#### The Subjectivity of Terrorism: Palestinian versus Israeli Guerrilla Tactics

While Israeli leaders and Western pundits offer scathing critiques of Hamas "human shield" tactics; a glance backwards reveal Jewish guerrillas operating with similar tactics and motives in the late nineteen forties:

...Bell does offer some excellent insights about the motives of the Irgun and the Stern Gang, which also help to explain why other terrorist groups also perpetrate seemingly hopeless acts of violence. Bell's keenest observation was that the Irgun used violent acts of terrorism because they wanted to force the British to interrogate and imprison members of the Jewish community in Palestine to create more sympathizers and increase support for their terrorist group within the Yishuv.<sup>1</sup> This is an important point because other terrorist groups have also justified their use of violence by saying it is designed to provoke government crackdowns on the general population that will, in turn, create more sympathizers for the terrorist groups within the communities they operate in. (Bell in Laffiteau: 2014)

Similarly, Palestinian terror acts have consistently invited the wrath of the IDF and Israeli state security services who target Gaza Palestinians in retaliatory actions like air raids, artillery attacks and collective punishments like border closings. The Israeli state may well be a vibrant democracy but the Palestinians under Israeli authority are subject to arbitrary arrest and confinement without charge under a harsh penal code designed to break their will to organization and resist occupation and oppression. Israel's prisons are full of Palestinian prisoners with little recourse to fair treatment. In fairness, occasionally-captured Israeli soldiers have fared little better in Palestinian custody and are usually used for prisoner exchange. As well, Palestinian desperation as fostered a martyr's cult of suicide bombers. Ironically, the mass suicide of Jews under Roman attack at Masada is venerated as a sacred act of nobility. Perspective is everything.

### The Canadian Angle

The realpolitik of Canada's approach to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process is reflected in John Baird's recent condescending paternalism towards the Palestinian Authority after it was revealed that they may succeed in joining the International Criminal Court (ICC). Israel and the U.S., alone among the world's democracies; have refused to join this war crimes body. It is likely that the recent conduct of both Israel and Hamas in Gaza would interest the court.

While it is natural for the weaker party to a dispute to seek third party mediation; the massive power imbalance between the Israelis and Palestinians is usually ignored or minimized by Israeli, American and Canadian diplomats who insist that the Palestinians negotiate directly with the Israelis. The Palestinian Authority wisely sought to rectify this imbalance through increasing their international status through the United Nations since an enhanced international profile will ultimately improve their bargaining position.

Israel, Canada and the U.S. have issued enough threats and warnings to the Palestinians to suggest that the ICC is a body to be reckoned with; even by those who refuse to acknowledge its authority. In this case, Palestinian defiance regarding the ICC indicates an organizational ability and independence that bodes well for the future of a Palestinian state.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper has presented Canadians with a false choice on Middle East peace: either voice "absolute, non-negotiable belief in Israel" or be declared an anti-Semite. Emma Teitel of *MacLean's* wrote that, "His cheerleading for the Jewish state was excessive enough (even for a Jew) that it verged on the absurd." (Teitel: 2014). Stephen Harper refuses to be a real friend to the Israelis in the sense that he excuses their more objectionable behaviour for the sake of political support, fundamentalist religiosity and what he calls principle.

"Two days after Harper won a majority government on January 23, Hamas won Canadian-monitored and facilitated elections in Palestine" (Engler: 2013) Canada was quick to condemn the fair and democrat elections as a failure and immediately cut off aid to Gaza. "The aid cutoff, which was designed to sow division within Palestinian society, had devastating social effects." (*Ibid.*) Since Canada is among those few nations (also Israel and the U.S.) who consider Hamas a terrorist entity; it is worth commenting on the Harper government's approach to the highly-subjective concept of terrorism. Once again, the vital element of context is missing from the

government's stance although they are probably aware of the history of Hamas and its inevitability. A recent *Ottawa Citizen* editorial examined the fact the Harper refuses to acknowledge or investigate the root causes of terrorism; choosing instead to simply declare it an "evil" that must be fought with state security and military force. The editorial states that, "Conservatives like to use "root causes" as code for naïve and simplistic attempts to excuse terrorism as the inevitable result of poverty or some other social factor." (11: *Ottawa Citizen*: 2014)

While it is beyond dispute that Jewish terrorism in pre-1948 Palestine and the current violence perpetrated by illegal Israeli settlers in the West Bank had definite and well-documented causes; Stephen Harper would never apply the root causes argument to such events. They remain safely outside the realm of examination. Refusing to discuss the root causes of any given problem almost guarantees its perpetuation. To do so for myopic political advantage is at the very least, reckless.

Prominent among Harper's Canadian boosters is conservative senator Linda Frum, sister to strident neoconservative writer David Frum. When asked recently about Canadian Jewish support for the Harper government; Senator Frum commented in *MacLean's* magazine that Canadian Jews had simply grown tired of the "...notion that, when Israelis and Palestinians quarrel, Canada should consider the grievances of both sides equally." (*MacLeans*: 2013) In the current climate, senator Frum has little to fear in that regard.

#### Relevance of the "New Anti-Semitism"

December twenty-seventh marked the fifth anniversary of *Operation Cast Lead*; Israel's 2008-2009 invasion of Gaza. While commenting on Israeli-Palestinian issues it's important to note that the Canadian Parliamentary Coalition to Combat Anti-Semitism (CPCCA) has lobbied the federal government to adopt a sweeping new definition of anti-Semitism that would criminalize even the most reasoned criticism of the Israeli state's policies and conduct. Considering the Harper government's radical stance on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; it is vital for Canadians to publicly express their opinions on Middle East peace before the CPCCA censors succeed in redefining the legal limits of discourse.

Current immigration minister Jason Kenney and former Liberal justice minister Irwin Colter have been the most public voices of this bizarre program that is the Canadian chapter of a global movement to silence even the most reasoned criticism of Israeli state policy by creating a climate of fear.

According to American legal scholar and Israeli advocate Alan Dershowitz, there are nine distinct types of anti-Semitism: genocidal, political, ideological, cultural, economic, racist terrorism, Holocaust denial and denial of Israeli equality under international law. For the sake of brevity I will only discuss the alleged offenses of economic and political anti-Semitism. Considering the extensive documentation of U.S. backed Israeli violations of United Nations resolutions; the notion of Israel being denied equality under international law is puzzling.

As Chris Hedges wrote:

Because it has the power to do so, Israel—as does the United States—flouts international law to keep a subject population in misery. The continued presence of Israeli occupation forces [in the West Bank] defies nearly a hundred U.N. Security Council resolutions calling for them to withdraw. The Israeli blockade of Gaza, established in June 2007, is a brutal form of collective punishment that violates Article 33 of the Fourth 1949 Geneva Convention, which set up rules for the "Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War." The blockade has turned Gaza into a sliver of hell, an Israeli-administered ghetto where thousands have died, including the 1,400 civilians killed in the Israeli incursion of 2008. (Hedges: 2012)

Economic divestment campaigns against the Israeli state are falsely labeled as anti-Semitic in a vain attempt to discourage states and their citizens from taking peaceful steps to pressure the Israeli State. Dershowitz writes that, "Even those who believe that singling out Zionists or the Zionist state for criticism is not anti-Semitic must surely acknowledge that there is a difference between mere criticism of Israel and singling it out for unique sanctions such as divestiture or boycott." (Dershowitz, 2002) Describing the current international effort to bring economic pressure to bear on Israel is hardly unique unless one subscribes to the belief that Israel itself is a unique entity; rather than a regular nation in a unique situation.

It is worth asking why the brutal sanctions brought to bear against Iraq in the mid-nineteen nineties were not described in the corporate press as anti-Arab or anti-Muslim, which they certainly were. Such concepts lack the cachet required for reflexive employment in the manufacture of consent.

Canada signed the Canada-Israel Free Trade Agreement in 1997 for political and economic reasons. "In an implicit recognition of the occupation, Canada's free trade accord with Israel includes the West bank as a place where the country's customs laws apply. Canada's trade agreement is based on the areas Israel maintains territorial control over, not on internationally-recognized borders" (*Ibid.*) considering these facts it's safe to assume that Canada would have applied the same standard to Israel settlements in Gaza; had the territory not been strategically-abandoned in 2005. In stark contrast, "The European Union's trade agreement with Israel...explicitly excludes products from territory Israel captured in the 1967 war and occupies against international law." (*Ibid.*) Of, course; this territory may someday form the basis of a Palestinian state; if the Israelis finally agree to realistic coexistence.

With striking hypocrisy and an enhanced sense of victimhood; Alan Dershowitz and the leadership of organizations like Honest Reporting Canada claim that democratic Israel is unfairly singled out for greater criticism than openly dictatorial regimes like Saudi Arabia, Iran and Syria. While this claim is debatable, the Israeli state's self-description as the Middle East's only democracy and its status as a highly-subsidized U.S. client state actually requires that it be held to a higher moral standard than its neighbors, whose governments are barely accountable to their citizens. This requirement has nothing to do with the religious or ethnic character of the Israeli nation.

## Media Abuse of Holocaust Memory

Sun Media columnist Ezra Levant, in a recent *Toronto Sun* article on Gaza and the goals of Hamas, begged this query for rhetorical discussion: "Serious question: If Hamas terrorists in Gaza were to build Auschwitz-style ovens to burn Jews like the Nazis did, would the world still demand that Israel stop attacking them?" (Levant, 2014.) Summoning up and employing the horror of the Nazi Holocaust is a classic fallacy of reason whereby the someone seeks to discredit those with whom they disagree by employing a distracting appeal to emotion and guilt.

Were Friedrich Nietzsche alive today he might well consider Levant a man who; "...throw[s] a bit of their personality after their bad arguments, as if that might straighten their paths and turn them into right and good arguments-just as a man in a bowling alley, after he has let go of the ball, still tries to direct it with gestures." (Kaufmann, 2000)

The validity of this observation on Levant's crude tactic of associating the Nazi Holocaust with Israel's modern foes highlights the misleading presence of fallacious reasoning on the pages of publications that routinely ignore the conventions of reasoned discourse.

## The Evacuation of Gush Katif: Organized Self-Pity

### Military Dissent in Israel

In spite of vehement condemnations and denials by the Netanyahu government, members of elite IDF military formations, including forty-three members of Intelligence Unit 8200; are currently refusing to serve in Gaza and the West Bank. Members of this special unit sent a letter to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu saying they refused to "take part in actions against Palestinians" and "continue serving as tools in cementing the military's control over the Occupied Territories." The letter...singled out the unit's surveillance of Palestinians and accused it of collecting information that is "used for political persecution" and "harms innocent people." (*Ottawa Citizen*, 2014)

Netanyahu, a former commando and noted exponent of military solutions; later tempered his harsh criticism of Unit 8200 and praised the efforts of it and other elite IDF units. While the military protest movement is still relatively small, there exists a growing consensus; particularly among reservists; that the IDF is harming both its international reputation and morale by using violence and espionage tactics to oppress Palestinians.

### Solutions

The Harper government recently announced \$66 million in aid to the Palestinian Authority in stark contrast to their former threats to cut all funding if the Palestinian Authority pursued the modest goal of securing observer status at the UN. Rather than donate Canadian tax dollars, Harper would do better by encouraging the Israelis to relinquish control of Gaza's borders, air space and coastal zones; thereby empowering the Palestinians to fully profit from agriculture, fishing, manufacturing, tourism and the extraction of offshore natural gas reserves. The profits from these industries would largely solve Gaza's financial woes and restore dignified independence to her people. Beyond that, a free and secure Gaza would provide a positive example for other groups struggling for peace and autonomy.

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