

Israel's War against Hamas: Rhetoric and Reality

Avi Shlaim

Avi Shlaim is a professor of International Relations at the University of Oxford and the author of *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World* and of *Lion of Jordan: King Hussein's Life in War and Peace*.

Israel's war on Gaza lasted 22 days and claimed the life of over 1,200 Palestinians and 13 Israelis. The only way to make sense of this senseless war is through understanding the historical context. The State of Israel was established in May 1948 on the basis of a UN resolution. Nevertheless, it involved a monumental injustice to the Palestinians.

I write as someone who served loyally in the Israeli army in the mid-1960s and who has never questioned the legitimacy of the state of Israel within its pre-1967 borders. What I utterly reject is the Zionist colonial project beyond the Green Line. The Israeli occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip in the aftermath of the June 1967 war had very little to do with security and everything to do with territorial expansionism. The aim was to establish Greater Israel through permanent political, economic and military control over the Palestinian territories. And the result has been one of the most prolonged and brutal military occupations of modern times.

SETTLEMENTS

Gaza is a classic case of colonial exploitation in the post-colonial era. The building of civilian Jewish settlements on occupied Arab territories began in the immediate aftermath of the Six-Day War. These settlements are both illegal and an insurmountable obstacle to peace. They are at once the instrument of exploitation and the symbol of the hated occupation. In Gaza, the Jewish settlers numbered only 8,000 in 2005 compared with 1.4 million local residents. Yet the settlers controlled 25% of the territory, 40% of the arable land and a large share of the desperately scarce water resources. Cheek by jowl with these foreign intruders, the majority of the local population lived in abject poverty and unimaginable misery. Eighty per cent of them still subsist on less than \$2 a day and rely for food rations on UNRWA, the UN Relief and Works Agency. The living conditions in the strip remain an affront to civilized values, a powerful precipitant to resistance and a fertile breeding ground for political extremism.

AN OPEN AIR PRISON

Israel's settlers were withdrawn but Israeli soldiers continued to control all access to the Gaza Strip by land, sea and air. Gaza was converted overnight into an open-air prison. From this point on, the Israeli air force enjoyed unrestricted freedom to drop bombs, to make sonic booms by flying low and breaking the sound barrier, and to terrorize the inhabitants of this prison. Despite all the handicaps, the Palestinian people succeeded in building the only genuine democracy in the Arab world with the possible exception of Lebanon and Morocco. In January 2006, free and fair elections for the Legislative Council of the Palestinian Authority brought to power a Hamas-led government. Israel, however, refused to recognize the democratically elected government, claiming that Hamas is purely and simply a terrorist organization.

America and the EU shamelessly joined Israel in ostracizing and demonizing the Hamas government and in trying to bring it down by withholding tax revenues and foreign aid. A surreal situation thus developed with a significant part of the international community imposing economic sanctions not against the occupier but against the occupied, not against the oppressor but against the oppressed.

BLAMING THE VICTIM

As so often in the tragic history of Palestine, the victims were blamed for their own misfortunes. Israel's propaganda machine persistently purveyed the notion that the Palestinians are terrorists, that they reject coexistence with the Jewish state, that their nationalism is little more than anti-Semitism, that Hamas is just a bunch of religious fanatics, and that Islam is incompatible with democracy. But the simple truth is that the Palestinian people are a normal people with normal aspirations. They are no better but they are no worse than any other national group. What they aspire to, above all, is a piece of land to call their own on which to live in freedom and dignity.

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Civilization is Possible, 2008, Red Hen Press, Los Angeles.

The Central American Solidarity Movement, Oral History Program of the University of California Los Angeles, The Regents of the University of California, 2005.

Common Sense for the Twenty-first Century, (Radio commentaries and interviews directed to the formation of an international peace system), Red Hen Press, Los Angeles, 2004.

Guerrillas of Peace On the Air, (Radio commentaries, reports and other works which examine and promote the ideology of peace), Red Hen Press, Los Angeles, 2000, second printing, 2002.

Guerrillas of Peace, Liberation Theology and the Central American Revolution, Third Edition, toExcel Press, iUniverse.com 2000; Second Edition, South End Press, Boston, 1987.

LETTER FROM A JEWISH GRANDMOTHER

January 23, 2009

Dear Blase and Theresa,

I entered the Gaza Strip on Wednesday night with my friend and fellow activist Sharon Wallace. Out of all the devastation I have seen so far, there is one story in particular that I think the world needs to hear. I met a mother who was at home with her ten children when Israeli soldiers entered the house. The soldiers told her she had to choose five of her children to "give as a gift to Israel." As she screamed in horror they repeated the demand and told her she could choose or they would choose for her. Then these soldiers murdered five of her children in front of her.

I talked to people on the street who told stories of wild dogs coming to eat their dead neighbors, relatives bleeding to death because Israel would not allow emergency workers into the area, and Israeli soldiers entering homes to beat and kill.

But despite the immense mourning and devastation, people are starting to put their lives back together. Sabreen, a young woman from Rafah, told me, "We are a strong people. No matter how many times Israel bombs us we are not leaving. We will keep trying to live as normal a life as possible."

Barbara Lubin is the Director of MECA, The Middle East Children's Alliance. To aid the people of Gaza contact: meca@mecaforpeace.org, <http://www.mecaforpeace.org> Middle East Children's Alliance | 1101 8th Street | Suite 100 Berkeley | CA | 94710

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Our program WORLD FOCUS has become one of the most popular on KPFK, 90.7 fm, Pacifica Radio. *You can tune in at 10:00 AM on Sunday mornings. A few recent interviewees:*

Noam Chomsky, Chris Hedges, Seymour Hirsh, John Perkins, author of *The Secret History of the American Empire*, Rabbi Michael Lerner, Founder of the Tikkun Community, Professor Avi Shlaim, Oxford University, author of *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World*, Mairead Corrigan Maguire, Nobel Peace Laureate, Professor Richard Falk, UN Rapporteur to Palestine, Nicolas de Torrente, Executive Director of Doctors without Borders, Cole Miller, founder of "No More Victims," Helen Caldicott, MD, co-founder of Physicians for Social Responsibility, Senator Mike Gravel, Professor Andrew Bacevich, author of *The Limits of Power; the end of American Exceptionalism*, Reese Erlich, author of *Dateline Havana; the Real Story of U.S. Policy and the Future of Cuba*, Father Roy Bourgeois, founder of School of the Americas Watch.

Some Office of the Americas presentations:

Peace Sunday, Keynote Address.

Santa Monica Panel on the Gaza Massacre, Chair UC /San Diego, Human & Earth Rights Organization, lecture.

Symposium "The Different Faces of Poverty", Mount St. Mary's University, speaker.
Interfaith Peace Ministry of Orange County, keynote.

Oakwood High School, speaker.

ANSWER demonstration on the Gaza Massacre, speaker.

Democratic Clubs in Claremont and Santa Ana, speaker.

Interfaith Communities United for Justice and Peace, speaker.

La Sierra University, lecture.

Latin America Encuentro, keynote.

UCLA lecture series.

California State University Northridge, lecture.

The Office of the Americas Peace Calendar is sent out to many thousands of subscribers every week. It includes OOA's events together with announcements of actions for justice and peace.

Our monthly newsletter to sustainers focuses on issues and actions of the month.

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