

# Does Israel's Zionist Project require the Destruction of Palestine?

Interview with Gregory Harms

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*American journalist and scholar Gregory Harms believes that the recent 8-day Israeli war on the Gaza Strip might have been waged to distract public attention from the internal socioeconomic crises and problems the Israeli regime faces, especially ahead of the January 2013 legislative elections. He believes that launching airstrikes on Gaza may serve to give Benjamin Netanyahu and the Likud party a secure vote in the upcoming elections.*

"[P]ushing the Gaza button focuses Israelis on matters of security. The population in Israel is highly manipulated and taught to be fearful... Israel's isolation is bad for the country and its people; it cultivates a very unhealthy national psychology. As a result – and quite similar to Americans – the public is easily turned around. When things are too calm, the people begin focusing on domestic issues and the economy. This has been a serious issue in Israel, with massive protesting occurring over housing costs and income disparity. Israel's economy is better than most, but there are serious grievances, and when the Arab Spring took hold of North Africa and the Arab Middle East, its effects were felt in Jerusalem, Haifa, and Tel Aviv," he said in a recent interview with me after the announcement of ceasefire between Hamas and Israel on November 21.

Gregory Harms is an independent scholar specializing in U.S. foreign policy and the Middle East. He lectures, keeps a blog on Facebook, and publishes articles on CounterPunch, Truthout, and Mondoweiss. Harms has traveled throughout Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza, and has been interviewed on BBC Radio.

His first book "The Palestine-Israel Conflict: A Basic Introduction," 3rd ed. (Pluto Press, 2012) is brief and general summary of the history of Israeli-Palestinian conflict since the establishment of the Israeli regime in 1948.

I conducted an interview with Gregory Harms a few days after the conclusion of the Operation Pillar of Defense which claimed the lives of at least 170 Palestinians and caused serious damages to the infrastructure and civilian buildings in the besieged Gaza Strip. Following is the text of the interview.

Kourosh Ziabari: Ceasefire has now been declared between Hamas and Israel, but through the eight-day attacks and air-strikes of Israel against the Gaza Strip, some 180 Palestinians, many of whom innocent civilians, have been killed. Why do you think Israel renewed its assaults on Gaza?

Gregory Harms: The question of why is a matter of speculation; but we can make some reasonable guesses. It's hard to imagine that the upcoming January elections in Israel are

not a factor. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is likely looking to focus the country on security issues as well as consolidate Likud's coalition in the Knesset, Israel's parliament. He and Likud are the expected victors, but the elections are too near for this not to be a consideration.

Another possible factor is Hamas's increased regional prestige. Because of the new leadership in Cairo under President Mohamed Morsi, the strong presence of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egyptian politics, and Hamas's severing of ties with its former sponsor in Damascus, relations between Hamas and Cairo have progressed. Hamas's growing ties with Qatar and Turkey also signal the Islamist organization's increased status. Israel's strategic take on this is difficult to discern, but if this development did factor in the recent violence, it is Tel Aviv acting on its longstanding impulse of using the military first. One possible benefit, from Israel's perspective, is that now that Morsi and company have played a key role in achieving a truce, Gaza has been pushed closer to Egypt. For Tel Aviv, the best-case scenario is that Gaza becomes Cairo's problem altogether, as it was before 1967.

Iran could very well be a possible motive. If Tel Aviv plans on attacking Tehran's nuclear facilities anytime soon, it will want Hamas's weapon supplies diminished. If this is indeed a rationale, it raises the question of Hizballah's caches and preparedness in Lebanon. Whether Iran is a factor is difficult to say. The Obama White House has to-date shown no interest in direct armed intervention in Iran, which in turn makes a unilateral Israeli operation an unpopular notion among the majority of Israelis. Furthermore, Iran is a very large country that can fight back, automatically making it a less likely candidate for US-Israeli action.

There is also the fast-approaching bid on the part of Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas to seek nonmember observer-state status for Palestine at the United Nations. By roughing up Gaza, there might be a hope of getting the Palestinian Authority to shift course. Israel's foreign ministry has already talked of removing Abbas from power in the event the PA makes headway at the UN General Assembly – which is almost guaranteed. As stated in a foreign ministry paper, quoted in the *Guardian* (Nov. 14),

“A reality in which the United Nations recognizes a Palestinian state according to a unilateral process will destroy all Israeli deterrence and completely harm its credibility ... [T]he only other option in this case would be the toppling of Abbas's government ... The other option, of containment or a softer response, would be seen as raising a white flag.”

This is extraordinary language for a UN member state to use against another entity. Imagine for a minute this kind of rhetoric being used by Moscow or Beijing about the Israeli prime minister. You won't need a full minute for that thought experiment.

Israel's calculations are difficult, if not impossible, to determine. One could analyze and guess the issue to death. And at the practical level, it doesn't matter that much. It's not crucial that we know why Israel assassinated Hamas military commander Ahmed al-Jabari and initiated Operation Pillar of Defense. Even if we had direct access to Netanyahu's mind, where would that put us? Israel would still be a regional belligerent functioning as an extension of US power. And Gaza – and the Palestinians in general – would still be at the receiving end of Washington's policy of preventing democracy and keeping Israel militant. Instead, the focus should be Gaza's situation as an occupied territory, and that Israel, along with maintaining its occupation of the territory's exterior, subjects the people there to devastating armed violence. Popular pressure can do something about that. Americans and

Europeans can have an effect. They cannot have an effect on what lurks in the minds of people like Netanyahu, Ehud Barak, and the architects involved in these operations.

Kourosh Ziabari: It was reported that during its onslaught on the Gaza Strip, Israel bombarded many civilian facilities such as hospitals, mosques, schools, refugee camps and even the Gaza city's sport stadium. What is the objective of the Israeli regime? Why does it attack Gaza Strip's infrastructures every time it starts to pound the coastal region?

Gregory Harms: This policy doesn't just apply to Gaza. I was in Ramallah in 2002 shortly after Operation Defensive Shield. This was in the early post-9/11 period, of course, and after some suicide bombings, the IDF reentered the West Bank areas from which it had withdrawn after the Oslo Accords. There was one demolished government building after another. I and some others were given a tour of the broadcasting headquarters there, and though the building was still standing, it was one burned out, strewn room after another, with enormous holes blasted through the walls. Much equipment was destroyed and furniture looked like a tornado blew through the building. So what happened in 2008-09 during Operation Cast Lead, and now during Pillar of Defense, is not a recent development.

This policy of Israel every once in a while destroying (or re-destroying) Palestine's infrastructure indicates Tel Aviv's desire for the Palestinian territories to be feeble and dependent. The settlements and land expropriation in the West Bank are a part of this. The economic isolation and blockade of Gaza – which Israel has privately referred to as “economic warfare” – is part of this. The maximal Zionist project is to have a minimal Palestine; ideally, no Palestine. But they are going to have to suffice with a minimal one. And given the martial mindset in Tel Aviv, the solution is simple: let the IDF handle it. It doesn't cost anything. The United States provides material and diplomatic support, and Western Europe is on board. There's always talk of Israel becoming isolated in the region and within the international community – which is indeed bad for Israel – but this does not intimidate Tel Aviv's top-level planners. This is similar to the editorializing commonly found in the American press that Washington, because of its aggressive policies in the Middle East and its relationship with Israel, is jeopardizing US “credibility in the Arab world.” This is not a concern in Washington at the executive level. The only credibility desired at the executive level is the kind established by intimidation.

Kourosh Ziabari: Somewhere in your recent article, you argued that the Operation Pillar of Defense might have been launched with a short-term objective of giving Benjamin Netanyahu and his Likud party a secure vote in the upcoming elections. In what ways could a hard-hitting attack on the Gaza Strip and crushing of Hamas have contributed to the success of Netanyahu in the January 2013 legislative elections?

Gregory Harms: As I mentioned, pushing the “Gaza” button focuses Israelis on matters of security. The population in Israel is highly manipulated and taught to be fearful. And like I said above, Israel's isolation is bad for the country and its people; it cultivates a very unhealthy national psychology. As a result – and quite similar to Americans – the public is easily turned around. When things are too calm, the people begin focusing on domestic issues and the economy. This has been a serious issue in Israel, with massive protesting occurring over housing costs and income disparity. Israel's economy is better than most, but there are serious grievances, and when the Arab Spring took hold of North Africa and the Arab Middle East, its effects were felt in Jerusalem, Haifa, and Tel Aviv.

That said, the recent violence with Gaza found broad public support among Israelis. A ground invasion would be a different story. If the ceasefire doesn't hold and the IDF enters Gaza, it won't be as well received. And if there are significant IDF casualties in such an event, it will be even worse for Netanyahu's approval rating. Nevertheless, Netanyahu faces little opposition in January, just boosted his numbers with Pillar of Defense, and because of recent White House support for Israel's operations, the prime minister can now claim his relationship with President Obama is on solid ground and that all's well, which is very important to Israelis. Incidentally, this also significantly increases Obama's leverage over Netanyahu.

Food for thought.

Kourosh Ziabari: Why didn't the international organizations, including the UN Security Council, adopt a decisive position on the war crimes committed by Israel in the recent days? Why have they been so inattentive to the plight of Palestinian nation and the besieged people of Gaza, as they had been in 2008-2009 during the Operation Cast Lead?

Gregory Harms: I wouldn't call the UN Security Council's response in 2009 during Cast Lead attentive; it was the council basically reacting to enormous international pressure on account of the severity of the IDF's ground invasion during that conflict. The Security Council passed Resolution 1860 in a 14-0 vote, with the United States abstaining. In this case, it was Washington's way of voting for the resolution. In the Security Council there are five permanent members - the US, UK, France, Russia, and China - and 10 rotating members. The permanent five members, or P5, all possess veto power within the council. If any of the P5 vetoes a resolution, the resolution is defeated. It is also important to remember that Security Council resolutions, unlike General Assembly resolutions, are legally binding. So in the case of Res. 1860, the US abstention can be viewed as a supportive vote. And all 1860 did was generically condemn the hostilities and call for a ceasefire. There is no language in it about crimes; the wording is fairly vanilla. Moreover, Israel ignored the resolution anyway until the IDF finished what it had set out to do, which was to lay waste to Gaza's infrastructure.

The lack of international response during Pillar of Defense was likely due to it being a less severe exercise. There is always popular outrage, but we are talking about governments here. In the Security Council a statement was produced condemning the violence, but the United States blocked it. It was reported that Russia was keen on the statement and was seeking a resolution in the event a ceasefire failed to be established.

It is because of US veto power that the Palestine-Israel issue is typically locked up in the Security Council. Since 1970, Washington has used its veto over 40 times to block resolutions critical of Israel's conduct.

Kourosh Ziabari: What do you think about Israel's accepting ceasefire after some 8 days of fire exchange? I think Israel has never been targeted with Hamas's missiles and projectiles in such a serious way and perhaps it thought that if it continues to launch air-strikes against Gaza, it might receive a more devastating response. What's your take on that?

Gregory Harms: Israel is well aware of why rockets get fired into southern Israel. It's no secret. The Gaza Strip has been turned into a penal colony and some of its inhabitants have decided to throw things over the wall, so to speak. In general, if Israel wanted peace, it wouldn't conduct itself in the manner it does. This goes for the region and this goes for the

Palestinian territories. If you make a large number of people angry or desperate, a few of them are going to let you know about it in a violent way. The fact that the title “terrorism expert” has been created is sort of laughable, in a way. There isn’t much to be an expert on. Terrorism is an expression of anger and desperation, and typically involves low-tech methods, owing to the conditions under which the perpetrators live. Terrorists, as the label is commonly used, don’t use F-16s and Apache helicopters, they use what they have at their disposal.

Israel, like any aggressive state, accepts the calculated risk that its behavior is going to inspire reaction. If the threat is immediate, it’s taken seriously; but if the threat is abstract, then it’s often considered acceptable. The rockets being fired out of Gaza by Hamas and other groups only really affect southern Israel (though the radius was increased during Pillar of Defense). Nevertheless, it is clearly acceptable in Tel Aviv that the people in Sderot, Kiryat Malachi, and other towns in the south live in fear and occasionally get hit with rockets. It’s within tolerable parameters, from the view of the prime minister’s office.

It is doubtful Hamas is the issue, and one could argue that Israel doesn’t mind Hamas being around. The Islamist organization serves as the perfect pretext for keeping Gaza under the gun. Furthermore, as of 2007 with Hamas’s overthrow of Fatah (in Gaza) in what can be viewed as a preemptive coup, the Palestinians are now split geographically and politically. Tel Aviv is probably nothing but pleased.

As for why Israel agreed to the ceasefire, it may have only planned for a limited operation. Also, the White House was not on board at all with a ground invasion. And another point to consider is that all the major players in the American media had journalists in Gaza.

Kourosh Ziabari: What do you think about the role of Iran and Syria in supporting Palestine’s resistance movement? Syria is already entangled in a civil war, and Iran is under huge international pressure over its nuclear program; however, it was reported that Iran provided Hamas with the technology needed for the development of Fajr-5 missiles. What’s your viewpoint in this regard?

Gregory Harms: Neither country really factors, or has factored, much in the grand scheme of things. Both Iran and Syria have supported Hamas and Hizballah, yes, but this point is overemphasized. Anytime the *New York Times* reflexively and routinely underlines a certain point, skepticism is usually in order. For example, the *Times* journalists working in Israel cannot type the word “Hamas” without appending the phrase “which does not recognize Israel’s right to exist.” It’s become standardized, and it gets drilled into readers’ heads. The fact that the phrase is actually somewhere between misleading and false is irrelevant. According to the *New York Times*, it’s a truism.

The fact that Iran and Syria have supported Hamas and Hizballah is used by the major American news companies as a device to highlight Israel’s (stated) security concerns, and to show how scary and sinister America’s regional enemies are; it reinforces the canard that “Israel lives in a rough neighborhood.” When you pull back, it’s difficult to get excited about the issue, or even take it very seriously. You have the world’s sole superpower and greatest military force in world history (the United States) sponsoring the Middle East’s most



sophisticated military power (Israel) as it lords over what the *Christian Science Monitor* describes as “the most foreign-aid dependent society on earth” (Gaza). And then a couple of second- and third-rate powers (Iran and Syria, respectively) give the government of the most foreign-aid dependent society on earth some guns, rockets, money, and verbal support. When one steps back and takes stock of this situation, one discovers an issue that is closer to a non-issue.

To be fair to the question: early this year, Hamas broke with Bashar al-Assad. Hamas prime minister in Gaza, Ismail Haniyeh, voiced support for the opposition in Syrian and did so while in Cairo, adding to the symbolic significance. Hamas leader-in-exile Khaled Meshal, who had been based in Damascus, left Syria at that time and established a new base of operations in Qatar. For this, Syrian state television pilloried Meshal, stating he was undergoing a “romantic emotional crisis.” It was seen as quite a blow to Syria that Hamas would not only cut ties with Damascus but cultivate closer relations with countries like Turkey and Qatar, two of the states leading the regional support for the Free Syria Army.

Iran is still a supporter, but relations cooled between Hamas and Tehran for a while, owing to the Syrian issue. However, both sounded (overly) triumphant notes due to the Fajr-5 missiles; the head of Iran’s parliament, Ali Larijani, appeared even more celebratory than Hamas in the press. Nevertheless, there’s little else to speak of regarding Iranian support. At root, Gaza’s problems are political, not military. And it’s doubtful that Tehran will play much of a role in the resolution of those political problems. Despite its record of keeping to itself and having never attacked a neighbor in the modern era, Iran is always seeking to expand its regional clout vis-à-vis the greater Sunni-Shiite regional contest between the Sunni Persian Gulf Arab states, Egypt, and Jordan, and the so-called “Shiite crescent” (King Abdullah II of Jordan’s phrase) stretching across Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon – another overstated situation.

Kourosh Ziabari: What do you think about the proposals put forward in the framework of Middle East peace process, by the Arab League states and other countries? Are such plans able to fulfill the Palestinian nation’s rights?

Gregory Harms: From 2001 to 2007, four reasonable proposals were created, any one of which could realistically be used as a point of departure for negotiating and resolving the Palestine-Israel conflict. In the final moments, literally, of Bill Clinton’s presidency – after Camp David II had failed to produce real results – he produced a final framework to which both parties agreed. The Clinton Plan called for the following: (1) a Palestinian state consisting of Gaza and a contiguous 94-96 percent of the West Bank; (2) East Jerusalem as the Palestinian capital; and (3) the right of return for refugees to the Palestinian state. Those are the very basic elements (though the Clinton parameters weren’t very elaborate to begin with), but that’s roughly what resolution of the conflict will look like.

In 2002 (and reissued in 2007), Saudi Arabia produced a proposal that was unanimously accepted by the Arab League, and which basically said that if Israel withdraws to the 1967 borders (the Green Line), the Arab states will normalize relations with Israel. In 2003, two significant independent proposals were negotiated by private Israelis and Palestinians: the People’s Voice and the Geneva Accord. Both plans were quite similar to one another, and not all that different from the Clinton Plan.

The diplomatic record features decades of proposals and initiatives – many by the Arab states and the Palestinians – and the systematic rejection of a legitimate peace process by

Israel and/or the United States. (I run through the diplomatic history in chapter 5 of my *Straight Power Concepts in the Middle East*.) When one goes through each proposal, plan, trial balloon, and so on over the course of the 1967-2007 period, it is glaring just how rejectionist Tel Aviv and the White House have been, since Levi Eshkol and Lyndon Johnson. What came to be called the “peace process” has usually been political theater.

So the problem isn’t that the conflict is inscrutable and complex and therefore a solution remains elusive. The plans mentioned above are all workable: a two-state solution with a Palestinian state in Gaza and the vast majority of the West Bank, most of East Jerusalem as the capital, and refugee right of return to Palestine, or compensation from an international fund. There is much talk right now of a one-state solution, but I have yet to see a compelling defense of this position. One-person, one-vote between the Mediterranean and the Jordan River spells taking the Star of David off of the flag. If the Palestinians have had this much painful difficulty getting their own state, it defies all reason that the next logical step should be to seek getting Israel.

As for rights, the Palestinians are forced to negotiate the remaining 22 percent of what was Palestine after World War I. When it comes to “concessions,” the Palestinians are doing the conceding; Israel as the occupying power cannot logically make concessions on land it occupies. Moreover, the refugees – all 4.7 million of them – do have the *right* to return to their homes in Israel, but that is simply not going to happen. So while it is important to bear in mind and recognize the *rights* of the Palestinians, it is crucial to also bear in mind that in any negotiated settlement of the conflict, those rights are going to be curtailed and not fully realized. It’s a question of what is the best, most reasonable solution that can be achieved given the circumstances. Holding out for full realization of Palestinian rights spells only continued suffering and the status quo. On that score, Tel Aviv and Washington don’t seem to mind all that much, as evidenced by 45 years of history and tomorrow morning’s newspaper.

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