

Gaza - The Blood-Soaked U.S.-Israeli “Ceasefire”

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Global Research, January 22, 2009

22 January 2009

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

In-depth Report: [PALESTINE](#)

On Saturday, January 17, after 22 days of pounding Gaza with bombs and missiles, tanks and mortars, ground troops and sniper fire; after 22 days of horror for the Palestinian people of Gaza who saw their schools bombed, their children murdered and maimed, and life turned into a hell on earth; after 22 days which took the lives of at least 1,200 Palestinians, including 350 children, “with more buried under rubble,” as the New York Times (1/18/09) acknowledged, and wounded another 5,200; after 22 days that left 26,000 Gazans unable to live in their homes, damaged 20,000 residential buildings, and destroyed much of Gaza’s already-battered infrastructure, Israel declared a “unilateral ceasefire.”

Israel’s declaration came one day after the announcement of an agreement—not with the Palestinians or the Hamas government of Gaza which it had been assaulting, but between Israel and the United States. The next day Hamas also agreed to a one-week ceasefire, and the fighting has reportedly stopped—for now.

Israel and the U.S. will no doubt try to portray this ceasefire as an act of compassion that demonstrates their humanity, their sincere desire for a peaceful resolution, and their hope that what they claim the source of the problem—Hamas rocket fire into Israel—can be solved. Nothing could be further from the truth. And no amount of lies and hypocrisy on the part of the world’s biggest terrorists will erase the images burned into the memories of millions and millions globally of 22 days of wanton slaughter perpetuated on one of the world’s most battered peoples—the Palestinians of Gaza, who are confined into the world’s largest open-air prison/concentration camp, in an area the size of the city of Detroit, with no way in, and no way out.

Israeli claims they achieved many of their objectives with the 22-day massacre of Gaza. That alone—the fact that mass, in many cases indiscriminate, murder of civilians, women, and children, including the massacre of refugees at a United Nations camp, achieved Israel’s “objectives” speaks starkly to the totally unjust nature of the Israeli assault.

Israeli Aims...

Israeli rhetoric about the nature of the assault on Gaza has been overt and bloodthirsty.

On January 10, Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni said that “Israel is not going to show restraint anymore...it is not a missile against a missile.”

A senior Israeli military officer told the Israeli newspaper Haaretz, “For us, being cautious means being aggressive.” He said, “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. Maybe someone there

will sober up before it continues.” (Haaretz, 1/7/09)

The massacre in Gaza was a continuation of Israel’s 60-year campaign to ethnically cleanse Palestine, destroy Palestinian society, and break the spirit of the Palestinian people. More broadly, this deliberately vicious assault was aimed at politically and militarily weakening and sending a message to any forces in the region who stand in the way of unfettered dominance by the U.S. imperialists and their regional attack dog Israel.

Again, recent Israeli rhetoric has overtly proclaimed the aim of crushing the Palestinian people. The International Herald Tribune recently printed a quote from Moshe Yaalon in 2002, when he was chief of staff of the Israeli armed forces: “The Palestinians must be made to understand in the deepest recesses of their consciousness that they are a defeated people.” (1/9/09).

And in February 2008, an Israeli minister, speaking of the situation in Gaza, warned that the Palestinians could bring on themselves what he called a “holocaust.” “The more Qassam [rocket] fire intensifies and the rockets reach a longer range, they will bring upon themselves a bigger shoah because we will use all our might to defend ourselves,” Matan Vilnai, Israel’s deputy defense minister, told army radio. (Shoah is the Hebrew word normally reserved to refer to the Jewish Holocaust. It is rarely used in Israel outside discussions of the Nazi extermination of Jews during the second world war, and many Israelis are loath to countenance its use to describe other events.)

The massacre in Gaza is linked to strategic aims of the U.S. and Israel to target Iran, which is considered their biggest obstacle in the Middle East due to its size, its location, and its energy resources, and because it has emerged as a regional pole of opposition to some of the directions the U.S. wants to take things and to Israel’s unchallenged ability to dictate terms to the Palestinians and its neighbors. Such forces come into conflict with certain U.S. and Israeli goals, even though they don’t represent a liberating future or a fundamental break from imperialism. Nonetheless, it’s the U.S. and Israel who are overwhelmingly responsible for the widespread suffering and deep oppression in the Middle East, and are the greatest obstacles to liberation in the region—including because of the ways imperialism has fueled and activated Islamic fundamentalism.

The U.S. and Israel are quite willing to engage in horrific and unprovoked slaughter in order to achieve these objectives because dominating and reshaping the Middle East-Central Asia region and strengthening Israel are crucial to maintaining U.S. global power and supremacy.

Preparing for a Ceasefire by Intensifying the Slaughter

Israel’s actions during the days leading up to the ceasefire were a gory illustration of its reactionary, anti-Palestinian people objectives, despite all its hollow protestations to the contrary. On just one day—January 15—even as Israel was discussing a ceasefire, it bombed a UN headquarters, a major hospital, and the offices of international news media groups.

The media offices were bombed, according to reports, “after Israeli forces assured Reuters that a 16-story Gaza building used as a media center by correspondents for the international press was not a military target,” and after Reuters news service had provided the Israelis with their GPS coordinates to avoid accidental strikes.

Israel targeted UNRWA—the United Nations Relief and Works Agency created to assist

Palestinian refugees from the 1948-49 war and their descendants. The Israelis have hit UNRWA facilities four times during the current assault on Gaza—including on January 6 when 43 Palestinians were murdered when an Israeli shell hit a school compound in Jabaliya refugee camp.

According to the Times of London (1/15/09), “The main UN compound in Gaza was left in flames today after being struck by Israeli artillery fire.” A UN spokesperson quoted on “Democracy Now” (1/16/09) stated: “Our warehouses have been hit by some type of explosive and have caught alight. The fire has spread from the workshops by the oil and spread to the warehouses. One by one, the warehouses are going up. We’re now trying to build a buffer zone between the warehouses and the offices to try and stop the offices. We’ve lost all our food and all our medicine to this fire.”

The fire spread so relentlessly, destroying vital food and medical supplies, because Israel targeted the UNRWA headquarters with white phosphorous—a deadly chemical weapon, whose use against civilians is a violation of international law. On January 15 the Times of London reported that spent shells found by Gaza doctors proved that Israel was using this deadly agent, which can severely burn or kill if touched or inhaled.

On the very day Israel announced its ceasefire, the New York Times reported that “two brothers, ages 5 and 7, were killed about 7 a.m. by Israeli fire at the school. Their mother, who was among 14 others wounded, had her legs blown off.” UNRWA’s Gaza director, John Ging, told the press, “These two little boys are as innocent, indisputably, as they are dead. The question now being asked is: is this and the killing of all other innocent civilians in Gaza a war crime?”

UNRWA’s spokesperson, Christopher Gunness, said: “Where you have a direct hit on an UNRWA school where about 1,600 people had taken refuge, where the Israeli Army knows the coordinates and knows who’s there, where this comes as the latest in a catalogue of direct and indirect attacks on UNRWA facilities, there have to be investigations to establish whether war crimes have been committed,” as well, he added “as violations of international humanitarian law.” (NYT 1/18/09)

All this is aimed at sending a message to the Palestinian people that there is no refuge for them from Israeli assaults, and a message to the world that no UN resolutions will impede it from assaulting Palestinians, and perhaps destroying or emasculating UNRWA itself, and furthering the effort to destroy Palestinian society.

Overflowing Morgues, Hospitals Awash in Blood, And Hundreds of Thousands Without Water and Electricity

This comes when life in Gaza has become a waking nightmare. Human rights attorney Yadin Ilam told “Democracy Now” (1/16/09): “We know for a fact that 250,000 people are without electricity since the war started twenty days ago, and half a million people are without proper water. Sewage is overflowing to the street, and we are on the verge of epidemics.”

Caoimhe Butterly paints a gruesome picture in her on-the-scene report on CommonDreams.org (1/16/09): “The morgues of Gaza’s hospitals are over-flowing. The bodies in their blood-soaked white shrouds cover the entire floor space of the Shifa hospital morgue. Some are intact, most horribly deformed, limbs twisted into unnatural positions, chest cavities exposed, heads blown off, skulls crushed in. Family members wait outside to

identify and claim a brother, husband, father, mother, wife, child. Many of those who wait their turn have lost numerous family members and loved ones. Blood is everywhere. Hospital orderlies hose down the floors of operating rooms, bloodied bandages lie discarded in corners, and the injured continue to pour in: bodies lacerated by shrapnel, burns, bullet wounds.”

Ceasefire: Continuation of the Assault by Other Means

The U.S.-Israeli “ceasefire” is an effort to continue to pursue these criminal aims. For one, there are reports that many Israeli troops will not immediately leave Gaza. Israeli military forces continue to surround Gaza, and Israel and Egypt continue to imprison the people of Gaza and control all access in and out. One element of the ceasefire is a U.S.-Israeli-Egyptian effort to tighten the strangulation of Gaza by destroying tunnels from Egypt that Gazans have relied on for basic supplies as well as small arms (without which they would be totally defenseless). So the starvation of Gaza will probably intensify as a result of this “ceasefire.”

Further, by declaring a “unilateral” ceasefire, Israel has refused to deal directly with Hamas, which is currently the Palestinian authority in Gaza, or to recognize any of the Palestinian people’s legitimate demands, such as lifting the siege of Gaza. The U.S.-Israeli action also cuts out any other big power internationally from having any say-so about the deal. And Israeli officials insist they have the right to attack again.

A key part of the “ceasefire” was a US-Israeli “memorandum of understanding,” signed the day before, that calls for “expanded cooperation to prevent Hamas from rearming through Egypt.” The agreement, which is vague, promises increased American technical assistance and international monitors, presumably to be based in Egypt, to crack down on the smuggling. As important, the United States agreed to work with NATO partners to interdict arms smuggling into Gaza by land and sea from Syria and Iran, and in a letter, Britain, France and Germany also offered to help interdict the smuggling of arms to Hamas.” (NYT, 1/18/09) The U.S. is promising Egypt \$33 million in aid to detect and destroy the tunnels into Gaza.

During the signing ceremony, the U.S. again gave Israel 100 percent support while blaming the slaughter on the victims: “We’ve said repeatedly that the continued supply of armaments to Hamas and other terrorist groups in Gaza...is a direct cause of the current hostilities,” Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said. “It is therefore incumbent upon us in the international community to prevent the rearmament of Hamas so that a cease-fire will be durable and fully respected.”

“Only Democracy in the Middle East”

Israel is further codifying the apartheid conditions inside Israel by banning the only three Arab parties represented in Israel’s parliament—the National Democratic Assembly, the United Arab List and the Renewal Movement—from running in next month’s elections. The reason—they’ve opposed Israel’s attack on Gaza and participated in demonstrations against it (leading to over 600 arrests). The parties were barred on grounds of “violating a 2002 law by refusing to recognize Israel as a Jewish state and by supporting a terrorist organization.” (Jonathan Cook, Electronic Intifada, 1/14/09)

Israel's Treaty Record: No Better Than America's Toward Native Americans

Israel's record on upholding international law and its agreements with the Palestinians is no better than how the U.S. repeatedly broke its agreements with Native Americans.

John Wolfensohn, a UN official in charge of overseeing the May 2005 disengagement of Israeli forces and withdrawal of Israeli settlers from Gaza, resigned in April 2006, telling Haaretz (7/21/07) that Israel violated agreements made to ensure the border into Gaza remained open: "Every aspect of that agreement was abrogated."

Mark Perry, co-director of the Conflicts Forum, a British-American group which mediates between the West and Islamist groups, including Hamas, stated on PBS's "Newshour" (1/5/09) that contrary to US-Israeli propaganda, "During the six months of the cease-fire [agreed on between Israel and Hamas in June 2008], there were 153 violations of the cease-fire by Israel, and 36 Palestinians in Gaza were killed by Israeli forces. Most important of all, the economic siege of Gaza continued."

There Is Still an Urgent Need for Greater Resistance

All this points to the fact that the temporary halt in Israel's aggression against the Palestinian people of Gaza is ongoing—and could break out into intensified slaughter at any time. And the criminal siege of Gaza and the U.S.-Israeli campaign of ethnic cleansing continues.

That means that the need for speaking out and resisting these US-Israeli crimes remains urgent.

One heartening example (and there needs to be much more of this): On January 15, protestors blocked Israeli consulates in Los Angeles and San Francisco. "Democracy Now" reported, "On Thursday, nine people were arrested after chaining themselves together to block the Israeli consulate in San Francisco. The protest came one day after six Jewish activists held a similar action at the Israeli consulate in Los Angeles. Dozens of others gathered outside the consulate, chanting 'U.S. Jews say not in our name.'"

People need to learn more about the real nature of Israel, its relationship to the U.S., and the crimes both have committed against the Palestinian people, and then act on the logic of that understanding.

*Larry Everest is a correspondent for Revolution newspaper (www.revcom.us), where this article first appeared, who has reported from Iran, Iraq and Palestine. Everest is the author of *Oil, Power & Empire: Iraq and the U.S. Global Agenda* (Common Courage) and a contributor to *Impeach the President: The Case Against Bush and Cheney* (Seven Stories). He can be reached via www.larryeverest.com.*

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