

Israeli Slaughter, International Culpability: Gaza massacre points to urgent need for viable sanctions

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There is every reason to be outraged. But despite the severity of Israeli atrocities in Gaza, we have little right to act surprised. Whatever else can be said, Israel has made it abundantly clear that until its actions are met with credible international sanctions, it will subject Palestinians (and very likely others in the region) to massive, recurring waves of violence.

This was clear when the Obama-Biden campaign helped to lay the political foundation for this assault. It was clear when, amidst threats of such an operation and ongoing colonization in the West Bank, the European Union voted to upgrade relations with Israel earlier this month. For those of us in Canada, it has been clear as the Harper government has sharpened its alignment with Israel in the absence of any sustained parliamentary opposition.

Still, although “Operation Cast Lead” (as the Israeli regime has dubbed its latest assault) extends more or less naturally from longstanding Israeli policies, it is many ways especially despicable. The most obvious issue is its scale. Beginning on the morning of Saturday the 27th, approximately 110 Israeli Air Force (IAF) fighter jets and helicopters bombarded the densely populated Gaza Strip with more than 100 tons of explosives, initiating what may well evolve into an even broader onslaught. By the end of the day, more than 230 Palestinians had been killed, an additional 780+ wounded.

As the death toll from air strikes continues to climb, hundreds of Israel Defense Forces (IDF) infantry and armored corps troops have been deployed on the border with Gaza along with IDF artillery batteries, and several thousands reservists have been called up in preparation for a potential ground invasion.

The assault has been characterized by brazen contempt for civilian life and by crass, cynical diplomacy.

The Israeli daily Haaretz reports that the IDF, long planning for such an operation, received final authorization the morning of Friday the 26th. That day, Major General Amiram Levin (res.) spoke on IDF Radio and conveyed the flavour of Israeli military doctrine regarding the then impending attack: “The whole issue of fighting against and bringing down the Hamas regime is a mistake and very difficult to achieve. What we have to do is act systematically with the aim of punishing all the organizations that are firing the rockets and mortars, as well as the civilians who are enabling them to fire and hide.” Yoav Galant, the head of Israeli Southern Command and a key commander in the attack, has since stated that a key operational goal is pursuing “the maximum number of enemy casualties keeping Israel

Defense Force casualties at a minimum.” Recall that Israel has designated the Gaza Strip as a whole an “enemy entity.”

It can also not be emphasized enough that, bombardment or no bombardment, Israel is perpetrating a profound and ongoing crime against the hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees in Gaza who have been stripped of political and residency rights within what is now Israel, pushed from their homes (mostly in 1948), and concentrated in a densely populated coastal territory under effective Israeli control from the borders and the sky. Military assaults such as these, like the more sustained policies of siege and economic suffocation, aggressively build upon this fundamental crime.

As for the diplomatic component of this assault, there is little question that the timing was cynically calculated in an effort to reduce international pressure. Some are happy with the results. Haaretz military correspondent Amir Oren, for instance, writes that “Israel’s timing of the offensive is actually pretty good: Both the paratroopers and the Golani brigade, which was going to replace them, maintained a high level of preparedness while most of the international inspectors in the region went home for Christmas — only 15 remain in Gaza.” A similar dynamic has compounded the effects of Israeli restrictions in limiting the presence of foreign media correspondents.

Still, there is no way that the international community can plead ignorance or stubborn gullibility, and responsibility for this ongoing slaughter extends far beyond Israel.

Egyptian officials, some of whom met with Israeli counterparts in the lead-up to the attack, reportedly provided explicit endorsement for Israeli military action against Gaza. Just before the assault, Egyptian forces were sent to reinforce the crossing at Rafah, the one land crossing Gaza has that does not border Israel.

The United States, whose Israeli-piloted aircraft are raining death and destruction upon Gaza (following up on the Obama campaign’s dangerous rhetoric), has toed the familiar line. Bush Administration officials have blamed the Israeli onslaught on the Palestinians, as the president-elect expresses “appreciation” for Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice’s updates regarding the unfolding crime. Meanwhile, European Union officials have used their upgraded contacts with Israel to issue a toothless call for a ceasefire, persistently packaging the ongoing massacre as a symmetrical conflict.

So-called “Quartet” envoy Tony Blair, for his part, had a week before the invasion already all but openly called for an Israeli assault on Gaza.

Regionally, the effective complicity of some governments and the inaction of others is at least precipitating an outpouring of organized outrage. Whether those culpable in Europe and North America face a sustained domestic backlash will reveal much about the political integrity of civil society sectors and the health of anything worth describing as progressive politics in our societies.

Meanwhile, the Israeli military assault has predictably been paralleled by a diplomatic or Hasbara (propaganda) offensive which has been publicly discussed for some time. “We won’t win in the suffering stakes,” Yarden Vatikay, head of the Information Directorate of Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert’s office, was quoted as warning advocates on December 26, “but we have to try to move the focus to the Hamas terror attacks against our civilians.” Foreign minister Tzipi Livni is stepping up whitewashing efforts in precisely this spirit.

Defense minister Ehud Barak, perhaps betting that association with additional war crimes offers a boost to any candidate in the current Israeli electoral climate (parliamentary elections are slated for February), has also been chipping in on the Hasbara front. In an interview with Fox News, Barak continued to mesh the politics of Israeli aggression with the “war on terror” — indeed, many Israeli columnists are proudly describing “Cast Lead” as Israel’s very own “Shock and Awe.” “For us to be asked to have a ceasefire with Hamas is like asking you to have a ceasefire with Al-Qaida,” Barak declared to his U.S. audience, adding a direct threat of ground invasion: “If boots on the ground will be needed, they will be there.”

The idea that any of this is “needed,” that any component of this operation is necessary, is nonsense. But it is nonsense with broad Israeli parliamentary backing. At the far “dovish” end of Jewish Israeli party politics, for example, Meretz joined in calling for an assault on Gaza and was kept informed as the plans were put into effect.

Still, anyone with their eyes open must see the vast gap separating Israeli objectives from the Hasbara so dutifully parroted throughout the West.

Consider the words of Israeli Brigadier General (res.) Shmuel Zakai, former commander of the IDF’s Gaza Division, speaking on IDF Radio a few days before the invasion.

“In Zakai’s view,” Haaretz reported on December 22, “Israel’s central error during the tahadiyeh, the six-month period of relative truce that formally ended on Friday, was failing to take advantage of the calm to improve, rather than markedly worsen, the economic plight of the Palestinians of the Strip.”

Zakai, stressing that Israel has “made every effort to separate ourselves from the Palestinians,” expressed some bewilderment at the apparent Israeli determination to go beyond concentrating Palestinians in a ghettoized Gaza (the right ethnic cleansing move, from his perspective) in order to actively suffocate their economy while using military assaults as the main instrument to force them to starve in peace.

“It’s just like after the disengagement,” Zakai was quoted as saying. “We left Gaza and we thought that troubles were over. Did we really think that a million and a half people living in that kind of poverty were going to mount the rooftops and sing the Betar hymn? That is illogical.” But instead of negotiating a truce based on the limited concessions which Hamas would accept under the circumstances (including opening crossings so that those imprisoned in Gaza can at least subsist), Israel has again opted for escalating violence.

The operative mindset was supportively presented on Saturday by Yaakov Katz, military correspondent and defense analyst for the Jerusalem Post: “The end-strategy is not completely formulated but officials said that if Hamas gets down on its knees and begs Israel to stop, the request will be considered.”

This vile, depraved determination to collectively punish and humiliate defies all but effectively genocidal logic.

Such logic may play well in the Israeli electoral arena. Reports indicate that the far-right Israel Beiteinu is siphoning votes from Likud for its resolute calls for escalating violence. Given his perceived role in the invasion, “Barak is back in the political ring,” one Haaretz report suggests. Perhaps Kadima, enveloping itself in the legacy of Ariel Sharon and visibly

orchestrating the invasion Hasbara, can get itself some of the credit. The Israeli military establishment will meanwhile effectively keep formulating and implementing policy.

But if these latest atrocities do not provoke the sort of rage that can be sustained, defended and directed against those European and North American officials who facilitate these crimes, those of us in the West will have less and less ground to credibly disassociate ourselves from massacres such as these.

Whether Israel escalates this massacre with ground troops or pulls back in order to merely confine and suffocate the population of Gaza for a period, it is frighteningly clear that without forceful external pressure, much worse is yet to come.

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