

The meaning of Gaza's 'shoah': Israel plots another Palestinian exodus

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Israeli Deputy Defence Minister Matan Vilnai's much publicised remark last week about Gaza facing a "shoah" — the Hebrew word for the Holocaust — was widely assumed to be unpleasant hyperbole about the army's plans for an imminent full-scale invasion of the Strip.

More significantly, however, his comment offers a disturbing indication of the Israeli army's longer-term strategy towards the Palestinians in the occupied territories.

Vilnai, a former general, was interviewed by Army Radio as Israel was in the midst of unleashing a series of air and ground strikes on populated areas of Gaza that killed more than 100 Palestinians, at least half of whom were civilians and 25 of whom were children, according to the Israeli human rights group B'Tselem.

The interview also took place in the wake of a rocket fired from Gaza that killed a student in Sderot and other rockets that hit the centre of the southern city of Ashkelon. Vilnai stated: "The more Qassam fire intensifies and the rockets reach a longer range, they [the Palestinians of Gaza] will bring upon themselves a bigger shoah because we will use all our might to defend ourselves."

His comment, picked up by the Reuters wire service, was soon making headlines around the world. Presumably uncomfortable with a senior public figure in Israel comparing his government's policies to the Nazi plan to exterminate European Jewry, many news services referred to Vilnai's clearly articulated threat as a "warning", as though he was prophesying a cataclysmic natural event over which he and the Israeli army had no control.

Nonetheless, officials understood the damage that the translation from Hebrew of Vilnai's remark could do to Israel's image abroad. And sure enough, Palestinian leaders were soon exploiting the comparison, with both the Palestinian president, Mahmoud Abbas, and the exiled Hamas leader, Khaled Meshaal, stating that a "holocaust" was unfolding in Gaza.

Within hours the Israeli Foreign Ministry was launching a large "hasbara" (propaganda) campaign through its diplomats, as the Jerusalem Post reported. In a related move, a spokesman for Vilnai explained that the word "shoah" also meant "disaster"; this, rather than a holocaust, was what the minister had been referring to. Clarifications were issued by many media outlets.

However, no one in Israel was fooled. "Shoah" — which literally means "burnt offering" — was long ago reserved for the Holocaust, much as the Arabic word "nakba" (or "catastrophe") is nowadays used only to refer to the Palestinians' dispossession by Israel in 1948. Certainly, the Israeli media in English translated Vilnai's use of "shoah" as

“holocaust”.

But this is not the first time that Vilnai has expressed extreme views about Gaza’s future.

Last summer he began quietly preparing a plan on behalf of his boss, the Defence Minister Ehud Barak, to declare Gaza a “hostile entity” and dramatically reduce the essential services supplied by Israel — as long-time occupier — to its inhabitants, including electricity and fuel. The cuts were finally implemented late last year after the Israeli courts gave their blessing.

Vilnai and Barak, both former military men like so many other Israeli politicians, have been “selling” this policy — of choking off basic services to Gaza — to Western public opinion ever since.

Under international law, Israel as the occupying power has an obligation to guarantee the welfare of the civilian population in Gaza, a fact forgotten when the media reported Israel’s decision to declare Gaza a hostile entity. The pair have therefore claimed tendentiously that the humanitarian needs of Gazans are still being safeguarded by the limited supplies being allowed through, and that therefore the measures do not constitute collective punishment.

Last October, after a meeting of defence officials, Vilnai said of Gaza: “Because this is an entity that is hostile to us, there is no reason for us to supply them with electricity beyond the minimum required to prevent a crisis.”

Three months later Vilnai went further, arguing that Israel should cut off “all responsibility” for Gaza, though, in line with the advice of Israel’s attorney general, he has been careful not to suggest that this would punish ordinary Gazans excessively.

Instead he said disengagement should be taken to its logical conclusion: “We want to stop supplying electricity to them, stop supplying them with water and medicine, so that it would come from another place”. He suggested that Egypt might be forced to take over responsibility.

Vilnai’s various comments are a reflection of the new thinking inside the defence and political establishments about where next to move Israel’s conflict with the Palestinians.

After the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza in 1967, a consensus in the Israeli military quickly emerged in favour of maintaining control through a colonial policy of divide and rule, by factionalising the Palestinians and then keeping them feuding.

As long as the Palestinians were too divided to resist the occupation effectively, Israel could carry on with its settlement programme and “creeping annexation” of the occupied territories, as the Defence Minister of the time, Moshe Dayan, called it.

Israel experimented with various methods of undermining the secular Palestinian nationalism of the PLO, which threatened to galvanise a general resistance to the occupation. In particular Israel established local anti-PLO militias known as the Village Leagues and later backed the Islamic fundamentalism of the Muslim Brotherhood, which would morph into Hamas.

Rivalry between Hamas and the PLO, controlled by Fatah, has been the backdrop to

Palestinian politics in the occupied territories ever since, and has moved centre stage since Israel's disengagement from Gaza in 2005. Growing antagonism fuelled by Israel and the US, as an article in Vanity Fair confirmed this week, culminated in the physical separation of a Fatah-run West Bank from a Hamas-ruled Gaza last summer.

The leaderships of Fatah and Hamas are now divided not only geographically but also by their diametrically opposed strategies for dealing with Israel's occupation.

Fatah's control of the West Bank is being shored up by Israel because its leaders, including President Mahmoud Abbas, have made it clear that they are prepared to cooperate with an interminable peace process that will give Israel the time it needs to annex yet more of the territory.

Hamas, on the other hand, is under no illusions about the peace process, having seen the Jewish settlers leave but Israel's military control and its economic siege only tighten from arm's length.

In charge of an open-air prison, Hamas has refused to surrender to Israeli diktats and has proven invulnerable to Israeli and US machinations to topple it. Instead it has begun advancing the only two feasible forms of resistance available: rocket attacks over the fence surrounding Gaza, and popular mass action.

And this is where the concerns of Vilnai and others emanate from. Both forms of resistance, if Hamas remains in charge of Gaza and improves its level of organisation and the clarity of its vision, could over the long term unravel Israel's plans to annex the occupied territories — once their Palestinian inhabitants have been removed.

First, Hamas' development of more sophisticated and longer-range rockets threatens to move Hamas' resistance to a much larger canvas than the backwater of the small development town of Sderot. The rockets that landed last week in Ashkelon, one of the country's largest cities, could be the harbingers of political change in Israel.

Hizbullah proved in the 2006 Lebanon war that Israeli domestic opinion quickly crumbled in the face of sustained rocket attacks. Hamas hopes to achieve the same outcome.

After the strikes on Ashkelon, the Israeli media was filled with reports of angry mobs taking to the city's streets and burning tyres in protest at their government's failure to protect them. That is their initial response. But in Sderot, where the attacks have been going on for years, the mayor, Eli Moyal, recently called for talks with Hamas. A poll published in the Haaretz daily showed that 64 per cent of Israelis now agree with him. That figure may increase further if the rocket threat grows.

The fear among Israel's leaders is that "creeping annexation" of the occupied territories cannot be achieved if the Israeli public starts demanding that Hamas be brought to the negotiating table.

Second, Hamas' mobilisation last month of Gazans to break through the wall at Rafah and pour into Egypt has demonstrated to Israel's politician-generals like Barak and Vilnai that the Islamic movement has the potential, as yet unrealised, to launch a focused mass peaceful protest against the military siege of Gaza.

Meron Benvenisti, a former deputy mayor of Jerusalem, noted that this scenario "frightens

the army more than a violent conflict with armed Palestinians". Israel fears that the sight of unarmed women and children being executed for the crime of trying to free themselves from the prison Israel has built for them may give the lie to the idea that the disengagement ended the occupation.

When several thousand Palestinians held a demonstration a fortnight ago in which they created a human chain along part of Gaza's fence with Israel, the Israeli army could hardly contain its panic. Heavy artillery batteries were brought to the perimeter and snipers were ordered to shoot protesters' legs if they approached the fence.

As Amira Hass, Haaretz's veteran reporter in the occupied territories, observed, Israel has so far managed to terrorise most ordinary Gazans into a paralysed inactivity on this front. In the main Palestinians have refused to take the "suicidal" course of directly challenging their imprisonment by Israel, even peacefully: "The Palestinians do not need warnings or reports to know the Israeli soldiers shoot the unarmed as well, and they also kill women and children."

But that may change as the siege brings ever greater misery to Gaza.

As a result, Israel's immediate priorities are: to provoke Hamas regularly into violence to deflect it from the path of organising mass peaceful protest; to weaken the Hamas leadership through regular executions; and to ensure that an effective defence against the rockets is developed, including technology like Barak's pet project, Iron Dome, to shield the country from attacks.

In line with these policies, Israel broke the latest period of "relative calm" in Gaza by initiating the executions of five Hamas members last Wednesday. Predictably, Hamas responded by firing into Israel a barrage of rockets that killed the student in Sderot, in turn justifying the bloodbath in Gaza.

But a longer-term strategy is also required, and is being devised by Vilnai and others. Aware both that the Gaza prison is tiny and its resources scarce and that the Palestinian population is growing at a rapid rate, Israel needs a more permanent solution. It must find a way to stop the growing threat posed by Hamas' organised resistance, and the social explosion that will come sooner or later from the Strip's overcrowding and inhuman conditions.

Vilnai's remark hints at that solution, as do a series of comments from cabinet ministers over the past few weeks proposing war crimes to stop the rockets. Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, for example, has said that Gazans cannot be allowed "to live normal lives"; Internal Security Minister, Avi Dichter, believes Israel should take action "irrespective of the cost to the Palestinians"; and the Interior Minister, Meir Sheetrit, suggests the Israeli army should "decide on a neighborhood in Gaza and level it" after each attack.

This week Barak revealed that his officials were working on the last idea, finding a way to make it lawful for the army to direct artillery fire and air strikes at civilian neighbourhoods of Gaza in response to rocket fire. They are already doing this covertly, of course, but now they want their hands freed by making it official policy, sanctioned by the international community.

At the same time Vilnai proposed a related idea, of declaring areas of Gaza "combat zones" in which the army would have free rein and from which residents would have little choice

but to flee. In practice, this would allow Israel to expel civilians from wide areas of the Strip, herding them into ever smaller spaces, as has been happening in the West Bank for some time.

All these measures – from the intensification of the siege to prevent electricity, fuel and medicines from reaching Gaza to the concentration of the population into even more confined spaces, as well as new ways of stepping up the violence inflicted on the Strip – are thinly veiled excuses for targeting and punishing the civilian population. They necessarily preclude negotiation and dialogue with Gaza’s political leaders.

Until now, it had appeared, Israel’s plan was eventually to persuade Egypt to take over the policing of Gaza, a return to its status before the 1967 war. The view was that Cairo would be even more ruthless in cracking down on the Islamic militants than Israel. But increasingly Vilnai and Barak look set on a different course.

Their ultimate goal appears to be related to Vilnai’s “shoah” comment: Gaza’s depopulation, with the Strip squeezed on three sides until the pressure forces Palestinians to break out again into Egypt. This time, it may be assumed, there will be no chance of return.

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