

The Impact of Israel's Gaza Aggression on Palestinian Political Realities

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Introduction: The Israeli assault on Gaza, "Operation Cast Lead", which began on December 27, 2008, has left more than 1400 Palestinians dead, and has caused an estimated \$1.9 billion in damage and destruction. Local, regional and international movements have been active from the beginning in attempting to stop the aggression. Unfortunately, instead of uniting Palestinians and Arabs behind a common cause, polarization has appeared in place of that unity. Gaza has instead become the battleground for local and regional interests and desires.

Israel's war on Gaza has only served to further divide and polarize internal Palestinian factions. Those same divisions have also been influenced by regional and international positions. The Arab position has aligned into two camps: the camps of 'moderation' and 'resistance'. Since the aggression on Gaza began, accusations have flown around, with some Palestinians and Arabs accusing Egypt of acting in complicity with Israel and the US because it did not permanently open the Rafah crossing. At the same time, Turkey has entered the fray, using its influence to attempt to persuade Hamas and Israel to accept the suggestions of the Egyptians and the French for a ceasefire, or to propose alternatives.

All this is occurring as a new American administration under the presidency of Barack Obama is sworn in. International and regional players are re-assessing their positions in preparation for the Obama Administration, with Iran and Syria in particular attempting to position themselves in a more favorable light, especially with regards to the Palestinian cause, using Islamic Jihad, Hamas and others who take their orders from Damascus.

Objectives and timing of Israel's assault on Gaza:

Israel has maintained several different objectives as to why it chose to launch a war on Gaza now. The objectives changed from day to day and from spokesperson to spokesperson, ranging from the desire to change the reality on the ground in Gaza, to destroying Hamas's rocket-firing capabilities and weapons smuggling, to removing any trace of Hamas completely from Gaza, all in the interest of Israel's security.

Israel's main goal, however, was to further separate the West Bank from Gaza, thus making the Palestinian project of liberation and statehood seem more impossible. When Israel withdrew to the borders of Gaza in 2004, Israel was able to focus solely on the

West Bank and east Jerusalem. Since then, Israeli settlement expansion has shot up steeply in the West Bank, while the judaization of Jerusalem has become very apparent. The number of home demolitions has increased and the apartheid separation wall is near completion. In short, by focusing only on the West Bank, Israel has managed to change the reality on the ground for Palestinians there, perhaps irrevocably. Palestinian villages and towns are more separated from one another by Israeli settlements and bypass roads than ever before. Israel still maintains complete control over them, so that Palestine is looking more and more like a collection of cantons, or Bantustans, rather than a territory in the early stages of statehood.

It would be naïve to ignore internal Israeli political considerations regarding the timing of this war on Gaza. Israeli national elections to the Knesset are due to take place on February 10, 2009. With left of center (Labor) and centrist political parties (Kadima) performing badly in the pre-election polls compared to the more hawkish right of center parties (Likud), it was necessary for those Israel politicians from Kadima and Labor to appear more hawkish, therefore engaging in military action against Gaza to appear 'tough on terror'.

With regards to the US, Israel also felt the need to complete its war on Gaza before Barack Obama was inaugurated into office on January 20, 2009. Assuming implicit support from the Bush administration, Israel can no longer confidently assume that it will receive that same kind of support from an Obama Administration. The Obama Administration, as of now, is an unknown entity.

Palestinian internal politics and regional/international ramifications:

Israel's war on Gaza did not merely target Hamas, but the entire Palestinian people. The aggression has successfully driven a large wedge between Hamas, Fateh and other Palestinian political factions. Unity talks that were underway before the war on Gaza began have ground to a halt as Palestinians struggle to deal with the disaster that is Gaza right now. Hamas accused the Palestinian Authority (PA) of not doing enough to stop the aggression, and even suggested that President Abbas was preparing to take control of the Gaza Strip when Israel ended its operation. The aggression also managed to strengthen sympathy and support for Hamas within the West Bank and around the world. The Palestinians who have suffered the most throughout this aggression have been the Gazans, and it is still unclear whether they will hold Hamas partly responsible for what happened to them. However, Hamas, though weakened militarily, has been strengthened politically, at the expense of President Mahmoud Abbas and the PA. There is no doubt that further division amongst the Palestinian people will give Israel exactly what it wants.

In addition, divisions can be seen within regional actors and whom they support. At present, Hamas has strengthened relations with Arab actors including Iran, Syria and Qatar, while President Abbas's PA still maintains strong relations with Egypt, Saudi

Arabia and Jordan. The demonstrations of support for Hamas seen throughout the Arab world have increased fears that there is increasing support for Islamic movements in those Arab countries. In particular, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt has taken advantage of the situation in Gaza to embarrass and shame its government in front of the Arabs and the world.

Arab countries have worked hard to end the aggression, creating a delegation of Arab foreign ministers led by the 'moderate' Arab countries. The delegation played a large part in pressuring the UN Security Council to issue a binding resolution on Gaza, having used their role to quash non-binding resolutions that the Security Council had originally planned to issue.

On the European front, French President Nicolas Sarkozy took a lead role when he visited the region on behalf of the EU in an attempt to push for an immediate ceasefire. Unfortunately, the EU's political support for the Palestinians in general has been declining of late. America's lack of involvement was also notable, as the Bush administration made it clear they did not hold Israel accountable for what happened in Gaza.

On a more positive note, however, Arab and international demonstrations and mass protests played an important role in shaming Israel for its aggression on Gaza, as well as showing support for the Palestinian people, and pressuring the EU to work quickly to end that aggression.

Recommendations:

- Focus on the priority of Palestinian internal affairs, working towards a return of national unity and cohesion. A temporary government should be formed to prepare Palestinians for legislative and presidential elections to be held simultaneously.
- Develop a clear national strategy, expressing a unified Palestinian position with plain demands: an end to Israel's aggression, the complete withdrawal of the Israeli army, an opening of the borders around Gaza and an end to the siege, and an immediate halt to settlement expansion, all within the political framework of ending the occupation. Peace talks should be suspended until Israel complies with the above demands. New strategies for peace negotiations should also be discussed, formed, and employed.
- Reform the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) so that it represents all Palestinian factions, including Hamas, as well as civil society representatives.
- Resume national dialogue talks, which are absolutely necessary and cannot be ignored. Talks should not be limited to bilateral negotiations between Fateh and

Hamas; rather, a national dialogue should include all factions and civil society representatives.

- Help rebuild Gaza. The PA must be strongly involved in the reconstruction of Gaza, focusing resources and finances on the rebuilding of Gaza's demolished buildings and infrastructure. It must also take on the responsibility of opening all Gaza crossings.
- Take immediate advantage of the support expressed by Arab and other governments and international grassroots movements. The PLO should employ this support to put pressure on Israel to end its occupation, as well as use it to push for a trial of Israel for international war crimes.
- Engage regional Arab and international actors in the pursuit of Palestinian statehood, to help put in place a new framework and rules for negotiations that will lead to a successful implementation of those negotiations and result in a complete end to the occupation. The PLO must also engage in the Egyptian and Turkish initiatives. In short, they must regain the political initiative and reach the point where they can influence regional and international politics.
- Support urgent efforts to put in place an international force to protect the Palestinian people in Gaza and the West Bank, in cooperation with the Egyptian and Turkish initiatives to end the crisis.
- Hold an international conference on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict that will emphasize the importance of international law and the relevant UN Resolutions in ending the conflict.