

PILLAR OF SHAME

ISRAEL'S NEW ASSAULT ON GAZA

PJP-24 Iowa City, IA. 20 Nov. 2012

It is dreadful to have to say it, but here we go again.

On the eve of Obama's first Inauguration in 2009, Israel violated a truce and unleashed a murderous attack on Gaza that ended up killing 1400 people, mostly civilians, in that imprisoned strip of land on the eastern Mediterranean. Now on the eve of his second Inauguration, the same thing is happening, with the same accompanying lies and excuses. That one was called "Cast Lead". This one is called "Pillar of Defense". Its real name should be Pillar of Shame.

Had Operation Cast Lead done what US and Israeli politicians promised it would do, we would not be standing here today. But the truth is that killing Palestinian people is not done in the interest of Israel's security. It is an end in itself, a kind of sport, a pleasing TV spectacle for an electorate taught to be cynical, to view the Palestinians as subhuman, and to parrot back their politicians' lies. Today, just as in 2009 and just as in 1996, when Israel attacked Lebanon in the Operation known as Grapes of Wrath, Zionist politicians are mugging for the cameras ahead of an election; and Arab bodies make excellent campaign props.

As always, when this kind of thing happens, Israel's professional and freelance excuse makers fill the airwaves to spin out the usual clap trap. But the Pillar of Shame rose up in embarrassing circumstances.

On Tuesday 13 November, the Reuters News Agency told us that Israel and Hamas had "stepped back from the brink of war" and agreed to a tacit truce.¹

On Wednesday 14 November, Israel assassinated Ahmad al-Jabari, the very man with whom it was negotiating a permanent truce.

This man, so far from being a mere "terrorist", has been described as Israeli's security "subcontractor" in Gaza.² According to Gershon Baskin, the Israeli truce negotiator, al Jabari was personally responsible for preventing rocket fire into Israel. When Hamas was unable to get other armed factions to go along with the policy of restraint, he directed that the rockets under his control be fired harmlessly into the desert.³ There have been flare ups in the last four years, but for the most part Hamas has held its fire and worked to prevent attacks. That's the honest truth.⁴

Contrary to popular belief, these exchanges of fire on the border with Gaza are typically initiated by Israel with so-called "pre-emptive strikes"; it is the Palestinian fire that is retaliatory; not the other way around.⁵ Israel will also "retaliate" against innocent civilians for Palestinian attacks on military targets; as happened on November 10, when Israel killed four innocent people to avenge the firing of an anti-tank missile at a military jeep.⁶ The killing of a mentally handicapped man on 4 November as he wandered near the "buffer zone", and the killing of a 13 year old boy playing football in front of his house, far away from Israeli troops, are not mistakes and are not acts of self-defense.⁷ They are war crimes, pure and simple, and they led to the recent flare up. Our media, dependent on the Israeli military's public relations office as its main source of information, inverts the normal sequence of cause and effect. It treats Palestinian violence as if it came from nowhere and was completely unprovoked. But that's just not true.

In recent days, we have heard of attacks on police stations. But police are considered civilians under international law unless directly involved in combat.⁸ We have heard of attacks on a media center: a civilian target under international law. The same is certainly true of a bank.

Israel's use of assassination to kill existing or impending truces is standard behavior, long documented by Israeli and foreign observers. What happened on Wednesday happened twice in 2002 alone, and the aftermath, so completely predictable, can only have been intended by Israeli leaders.⁹ It is blindingly obvious that Netanyahu ordered this hit in the hope of provoking another war. Just as in 2008, this is not a war that needed to happen. It will end in still another ceasefire; the very thing that was achieved the day before Israel attacked.

But doesn't Israel have the right to defend itself?, they say. How would you feel having to run to a bomb shelter so often? We might start by answering that bomb shelters are not such a bad thing; certainly not something to be underrated. The Gazans don't have bomb shelters. What they do have is a lot of children; in fact the majority of the population in that densely packed place are children. There is nowhere to hide and no way to get out. As for me personally, I'd rather have to run to a bomb shelter.

Doesn't a plea of self-defense kind of depend on the circumstances? If I break into your house and start taking all your stuff, and if you suddenly appear and start shouting, pushing and confronting me, if I then beat the hell out of you or kill you, can I make a plea

of self-defense? Well, in a way I am defending myself against probable harm at your hands. But the circumstances that brought us together are not, for my part, exactly innocent. What an aggressor does and what a thief does to protect himself from the natural resistance of his victim is not legitimate defense, but a continuation of the original act of aggression. That is the heart of the matter here, morally speaking.

Israel did not just spring into being in purity and innocence. It was born out of the violent conquest of somebody else's country. It exists because it dispossessed the native population, made them homeless refugees and barred their return on the grounds of their race or their religion.

Had this event happened long ago, or even if it had happened more recently but were now a thing of the past, wise people might have been advised to forgive and forget. After all, many countries, including our own, have exactly the same sort of criminal history. But it is one thing to pardon a past crime, quite another to make excuses for an ongoing crime. The conquest of Palestine and dispossession of the native population are still going on, even as we speak. The crime goes on in violent times like the present, and also in times of what the media calls "relative calm". It is what, ultimately, the fighting is all about: one immigrant people's extravagant assertion of a so-called historic "right" to forcibly take away another people's homeland. That's why the claim of "self-defense" does not quite cut it.

Had Israel given the Palestinians any reason to hope that they could achieve either equal rights or real national independence by means of negotiations, it might deserve more of the world's sympathy today. But the truth is, it did not do this.

Israel's "diplomacy" is just a stalling tactic to mollify world opinion while it continues the big land grab. It continues to relentlessly expand its settlements. In the Oslo period (1993-2000), when Israel pretended to be willing to trade land for peace, the settlement population actually doubled. Today, in the largest area of the WB, (Area C), Israel has used settlement expansion and forced removal of the Palestinians to create a 2-1 settler majority.¹⁰ No viable Palestinian state is possible with these settlements spreading all over the West Bank and in Jerusalem. Likewise, in Gaza, the people live in utter squalor, a humanitarian disaster deliberately created by Israel. The people lack access to minimum levels of safe drinking water and the coastal aquifer on which they depend could dry up completely in just a couple of years. A new UN study projects the territory

will be completely unlivable by the end of this decade.¹¹

This is the reality, my friends. But the Palestinians are supposed to just sit back and watch it all happen!

Israel expects to live in perfect peace and tranquility while crushing another people, robbing it of its land and livelihood, stunting its children, blighting its every hope for the future. Sorry, folks, but it just isn't realistic to expect to live a quiet life while you busily destroy somebody else. Resistance is inevitable. And if you use lavish modern technological methods of killing to crush that resistance, it doesn't mean that you have saved the world from barbarism. It means you have become the barbarian. The native people's ways of fighting back may be cruel and inhumane. They may lack the choice of means. They may face the choice of either fighting back indecently and indiscriminately or not fighting back at all. But that does not alter the moral calculus of the situation. They are not the aggressors. You are.

If Israel wants our sympathy, she should show the Palestinians that they can achieve their rights by the peaceful means of negotiations. Until that time, she merits the scorn and derision she is receiving today, all over the world.

The US, in backing Israel, does not advance the cause of peace but contributes to the cycle of violence. Israel is not the only guilty party. Our own government is deeply implicated in this crime, and it is our obligation as Americans to say it has to end.

NOTES

1. "Israel, Hamas Put a Lid on Gaza for Now", REUTERS, 13 November 2012:

"Israel and the Palestinians stepped back from the brink of a new war in the Gaza Strip on Tuesday, sending signals to each other via Egypt that they would hold their fire unless attacked, after five days of mounting violence.

The tacit truce arrested an escalation to all-out fighting, but both sides remain armed and primed for another round in the unresolved conflict that has festered since Hamas Islamist militants took over the enclave in 2007. Ismail Haniyeh, prime minister of Gaza's Hamas government, praised the main armed factions in the enclave for agreeing on Monday night to a truce.

"They showed a high sense of responsibility by saying they would respect calm should the Israeli occupation also abide by it," he said."

2. Aluf Benn, "Israel killed its subcontractor in Gaza," HA'ARETZ, 14 Nov 2012

3. Nir Hasson, "Israeli peace activist: Hamas leader Jabari killed amid talks on long term truce", HAARETZ, 15 Nov. 2012 :

"Hours before Hamas strongman Ahmed Jabari was assassinated, he received the draft of a permanent truce agreement with Israel, which included mechanisms for maintaining the cease-fire in the case of a flare-up between Israel

and the factions in the Gaza Strip. This, according to Israeli peace activist Gershon Baskin, who helped mediate between Israel and Hamas in the deal to release Gilad Shalit and has since then maintained a relationship with Hamas leaders. Baskin told Haaretz on Thursday that senior officials in Israel knew about his contacts with Hamas and Egyptian intelligence aimed at formulating the permanent truce, but nevertheless approved the assassination. "I think that they have made a strategic mistake," Baskin said, an error "which will cost the lives of quite a number of innocent people on both sides." "This blood could have been spared."

4. "Fighting flares on Israel-Gaza border", REUTERS, 19 June 2012. This report notes that this was the first case of Hamas rocket fire in more than a year.

5. Gershon Baskin, "A Misguided Assassination", NEW YORK TIMES, 11/16/12 :

"For years, it has been the same story: Israeli intelligence discovers information about an impending terrorist attack from Gaza. The Israeli Army takes pre-emptive action with an airstrike against the suspected terror cells, which are often made up of fighters from groups like Islamic Jihad, the Popular Resistance Committees or Salafi groups not under Hamas's control but functioning within its territory. These cells launch rockets into Israeli towns near Gaza, and they often miss their targets. The Israeli Air Force responds swiftly. The typical result is between 10 and 25 casualties in Gaza, zero casualties in Israel and huge amounts of property damage on both sides."

Of course, in each of these cases, we have only the word of the IDF that there was an attack being planned. The only thing we know independently is that Israel struck first.

But it is well documented that Israeli soldiers and security officials operate under tacit rules of engagement which allow the routine killing of "wanted" persons not involved in any imminent threat of violence. Cf. HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH, "A License to Kill: Israeli operations against 'Wanted' and 'Masked' Palestinians", 1993; AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL: "Israel must end its Policy of Assassinations", July 2003. No one familiar with the impunity under which Israeli personnel operate can take at face value reports that they initiate violence only in order to foil an impending terrorist attack.

That Israel initiates nearly all of the attacks which lead to flare ups on the Gaza border is a conclusion shared by Baskin and Yousef Munayyer, a Palestinian human rights activist:

"If you follow the dynamics of fire you will learn two things. First, the vast majority of projectiles from Gaza result in no injuries or deaths. Second, most of them are fired during "flare ups" which are initiated, more often than not, by Israeli strikes which cause significant casualties. Hamas has in the past worked to clamp down on factions firing projectiles, like Islamic Jihad and others. But when Israeli strikes target these organizations and kill and injure Palestinians in Gaza, it ignites responses that lead to flare ups."

Yousef Munayyer, "Bodies for Ballots", THE DAILY BEAST, 15 Nov. 2012. Also, Yusuf Munayyer, "Half the Story: What@IDF Spokesperson Leaves Out", MONDOWEISS, 20 Feb. 2012:

Statistical analysis indicates that Palestinian rocket fire normally follows Israeli attacks which inflict Palestinian casualties.

This conclusion in turn is consistent with the research finding of Nancy Kanwisher of MIT, published in January 2009: it is almost always Israel that breaks ceasefires. Cf. Nancy Kanwisher, "Re-igniting Violence: how do ceasefires end?", HUFFINGTON POST, 9 January 2009.

Israel of course is known to have violated the ceasefire leading to the attack on Gaza known as "Operation Cast Lead", 27 Dec 2008- 18 Jan. 2009. Cf. Sara Roy, "If Gaza Falls", LONDON REVIEW OF BOOKS, 1/1/09.; CNN NEWSROOM, "Who started it?", available on Youtube under the title, "CNN confirms Israel broke ceasefire first."

6. "After attack on jeep, Israel kills four in Gaza--medics", ASSOCIATED PRESS, 10 Nov. 2012.

7. "Israel kills Palestinian man near Gaza border-medics"; REUTERS, 4 Nov. 2012; "Israeli gunfire kills Palestinian boy in Gaza clash", REUTERS, 8 Nov. 2012.

8. Human Rights Watch, quoted in "Gaza Conflict: Who is a Civilian?", BBC, 9 Jan. 2009. Cf. "Targeting the Symbols of Government", in B'tselem, Guidelines for Israel's Investigation of Operation Cast Lead, 27 Dec 2008-18 Jan. 2009, Report, Feb. 2009.

9 Norman Finkelstein, BEYOND CHUTZPAH, University of California Press, 2005 p. 140.

For example, the killing of Raed Karmi in January. 2002. Of Israeli leaders, parliament member Shulamit Aloni said: "They knew there would be a response and that we would pay the price in the blood of citizens". Also Salah Shehadeh, July 2002. The attack, which killed 14 civilians, including 9 children, came just 90 minutes before Palestinian factions were to announce an end to attacks on Israel.

"What's the wisdom here", asked an Israeli politician. "At the very moment that it appeared that we were on the brink of a chance for reaching something of a ceasefire or diplomatic activity, we always go back to this experience—just when there is a period of calm, we liquidate". Cf. Akiva Eldar, "How to cease from a ceasefire", HA'ARETZ, 25 July 2002; cf. Adam Horowitz, "Israel's history of breaking ceasefires", MONDOWEIS on line, 14 Nov. 2012.

10. B'tselem: The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories, LAND GRAB, Report, May 2002 p.19. The settler population doubled I the period of the Oslo peace talks.

"EU on verge of abandoning hope for a viable Palestinian State", THE INDEPENDENT (UK) 12 January 2012.

Area C is 62% of the West Bank and includes the most fertile and resource rich land. The number of Jewish settlers is now more double that of the shrinking Palestinian population.

In May 2012, the Council of the European Union issued a statement condemning what it called the "forced transfer" of Palestinians from Area C. cf. COUNCIL OF THE EU, "Council Conclusions on the Middle East Peace Process", Brussels, 14 May 2012.

11. "Gaza will non be livable by 2020: UN Report", BBC, 27 August 2012; UN Country Team in the occupied Palestinian Territories, "GAZA IN 2020: A LIVABLE PLACE?": notes the water deficiency. Cf. "International Pressure Mounts over Gaza Blockade", RELIEFWEB, 14 June 2012: A consortium of aid organizations calls for an end to the inhumane blockade of Gaza, noting that the majority of the population there are children.