



Washington's Wars and Occupations **Month in Review #45**

by Max Elbaum, War Times/Tiempo de Guerras

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GAZA: CALCULATED CARNAGE, AND A POTENTIAL TURNING POINT

It's evident in the numbers: 1,314 Palestinians killed, including 412 children and 110 women; 5,300 injured, more than a third of them children. Four thousand Gazan homes destroyed, 21,000 badly damaged, 100,000 Palestinians homeless. Ten Israeli soldiers and three civilians dead.

It's evident in individual stories, even ones reported in *The New York Times* (Jan. 20):

Others who might seem like natural liaisons with Israel were also enraged. Fakhr Abu Awwad, who earned a doctorate at the University of New Orleans, had his house taken over by Israeli commandos days ago after he and his family fled. When he returned on Monday, he found bullet holes in the walls, televisions, closets and clothing. His toilets had been shot up and his floor urinated on, he said. 'This is the most moral army in the world,' he said in fluent English, a sarcastic reference to how Israelis speak of their military, as he walked around the house pointing out the damage.

It's evident in the response of human rights organizations: The U.N.'s Special Commissioner for Human Rights in Gaza Richard Falk charged Israel with "severe and massive violations of the Geneva Conventions," including collective punishment and targeting civilians. The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies said that the situation in Gaza was "completely and utterly unacceptable." Seven Israeli Human Rights groups declared a "clear and present danger to the lives and well-being of tens of thousands of civilians" and called for investigation of Israeli war crimes.

And it is evident in the way the assault was promoted by the Israeli leadership: Israeli peace activist Uri Avnery described the Israeli Army's strategy and doctrine:

Use overwhelming firepower to pulverize everything standing in the army's way and to kill everybody moving in the area, every human being who might possibly turn out to harbor hostile intentions, even if they are obviously an ambulance attendant, a driver in a food convoy or a doctor saving lives. To destroy every building from which our troops could conceivably be shot at – even a school full of refugees, the sick and the wounded. To bomb and shell whole neighborhoods, buildings, mosques, schools, UN food convoys, even ruins under which the injured are buried.... In this war, this has become political and military dogma: only if we kill 'them' disproportionately, killing a thousand of 'them' for ten of 'ours', will they understand that it's not worth it to mess with us. It will be 'seared into their consciousness' (a favorite Israeli phrase these days)...

The conclusion: Israel's attack on Gaza was saturated with war crimes. Crimes that were not "corollary" to the assault, but a calculated and central part of the entire operation.

THE POLITICAL OUTCOME: "UTTER FAILURE FOR ISRAEL"

Of course the Israeli leadership's goals went beyond wreaking havoc. But on each of its political aims, their war failed completely. That failure will stamp the Israel-Palestine conflict for years to come. And, especially because it comes at a pivotal time in the recalibration of U.S. policy, it will have huge consequences for the region and the world.

The crudest and most short-term goal of those who launched the war was to gather votes for Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni's Kadima Party and Defense Minister Ehud Barak's Labor Party in the upcoming Israeli elections. But since the end of the assault the even more hawkish Likud Party of Benjamin Netanyahu has gained in the polls.

Equally unmet were the "official" aims of the attack (corresponding to "destroy the weapons of mass destruction" for Bush's invasion of Iraq). Gideon Levy, ("Gaza War Ended in Utter Failure for Israel," *Ha'aretz*, Jan. 24) noted: "Stopping the firing of Qassam rockets was only achieved after a cease-fire had been arranged. Defense officials estimate that Hamas still has 1,000 rockets. The war's second objective, the prevention of smuggling, was not met either."

Another Israeli goal was to weaken Palestinian support for Hamas while strengthening Fatah and the Palestinian Authority led by Mahmoud Abbas, whom Israeli leaders believe they can bully and cajole into signing an agreement on Israeli terms. The opposite has taken place. Voices across the Palestinian spectrum (and everyone outside Palestine who is not living in a dream world) declare that Hamas' popularity has soared and Fatah's plummeted – precisely because Hamas resisted the Israeli attack while Abbas was seen as only weakly opposing if not outright collaborating with it. Also widely noted was the further fanning of longstanding anger against Israel among the 20% of Israel's population who are Palestinian and are treated as second-class citizens of the self-identified "Jewish state."

Further, Israel hoped its attack would weaken regional powers most resistant to Israel while strengthening governments, like Egypt's and Jordan's, inclined toward accommodation. Again, the results were the opposite. Grassroots anger erupted at both Israel and at the regimes that were seen as conciliating or abetting the murderous onslaught. The Egyptian government, which had apparently 'signed off' on the attack two days before it began, came under particular pressure. As the dust settled, the "radical" alignment of Iran, Syria and Hezbollah was politically strengthened; the "moderate" bloc anchored by Egypt and Jordan was on the defensive and in disarray.

Last, Israel was playing the very high-stakes game of trying to shape U.S. government policy as a new administration assumes power. Tel Aviv was not only trying to line up Barack Obama behind the longstanding all-for-Israel stance. Israel was attempting to use its "Iran-Is-Behind-Hamas-&-Terrorism" refrain to head off any steps toward Washington-Tehran negotiations and lock Obama into Bush's approach of confrontation and eventual military action.

Israel had a lot to work with on this final point. Demonization of Hamas and Iran has become conventional wisdom in U.S. mainstream discourse. Israel's Amen Corner in Congress, the media and of course the Israel Lobby eagerly jumped to the ideological barricades. And Obama himself had gone out of his way to pledge support for Israel during his presidential campaign. Even if all other goals failed, the Israeli leadership would have been delighted if they had been able to maneuver the new U.S. President into the same posture as his predecessor.

With such a powerful arsenal, Israel did not come up completely empty-handed here. But even in the U.S., where Zionist influence is strongest outside Israel itself, there are many signs that the Israelis overplayed their hand. Partly because of the sheer scale of Israeli brutality; partly because of the intense anger throughout the Arab and Muslim worlds; partly because of shifts Obama wants to make in U.S. regional strategy to recover from the debacles of Bush/Neocon militarism; and partly because of the level of protest and disgust at Israeli actions within the U.S. – for all these reasons things got worse for Tel Aviv instead of better. Washington's shifts so far (see below) are small ones, and they could well be reversed. But it is also possible, especially if the peace, human rights and anti-racist movements rise to the moment, that a positive shift in Washington's course can be won.

PRESSURE FOR CHANGE

A key factor the incoming administration must weigh is the new level of pressure coming from the Arab and Muslim worlds. The driving force is anger from below, but popular fury is now finding expression at the regime level. The most ripples have been caused by a stunning article in London's *Financial Times* (Jan 23) by the former director of Saudi Arabian Intelligence Services, longtime pro-Western figure Turki al-Faisal:

In my decades as a public servant, I have strongly promoted the Arab-Israeli peace process.... But after Israel launched its bloody attack on Gaza, these pleas for optimism and co-operation now seem a distant memory. Not only have the Israeli Defence Forces murdered more than 1,000 Palestinians, but they have come close to killing the prospect of peace itself... America is not innocent in this calamity. Not only has the Bush administration left a sickening legacy from the death of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis to the humiliation and torture at Abu Ghraib, it has also, through an arrogant attitude about the butchery in Gaza, contributed to the slaughter of innocents. If the US wants to continue playing a leadership role in the Middle East and keep its strategic alliances intact – especially its 'special relationship' with Saudi Arabia – it will have to drastically revise its policies vis-à-vis Israel and Palestine.

Going further, al-Faisal crossed a previously uncrossable line by suggesting that Saudi Arabia might join arch-rival Iran in a common effort against Israel:

Last week, President Mahmoud Ahmadi-Nejad of Iran wrote a letter to King Abdullah calling on him to take a more confrontational role over 'this obvious atrocity and killing of your own children' in Gaza.... this reveals the extent that the war has united an entire region, both Shia and Sunni.... So far, the kingdom has resisted these calls to lead a jihad against Israel, but every day this restraint becomes more difficult.... people of conscience from every corner of the world are clamoring for action. Eventually, the kingdom will not be able to prevent its citizens from joining the worldwide revolt against Israel.

Notably there was also a wave of anti-Gaza assault protest within the U.S. Demonstrations took place across the country, with a new generation of young Palestinians often in the lead of actions that included an unprecedented number of young anti-Zionist Jews. The solid blank-check-for-Israel front within the Jewish establishment was also breached by a range of liberal Zionists, including the new J Street Lobby, who called for a different approach to the Israel-Palestine conflict. Polls also showed the U.S. public sharply divided over the Israeli assault, with only 44% in favor and 41% (including a majority of non-Republicans surveyed) opposed, a very high figure given the pro-Israel barrage pervading the media. And the remarkable segment broadcast on "60 Minutes" Jan. 25 (posing choices as "ethnic cleansing, apartheid or democracy") indicates that even the media's pro-Israel wall may be breaking down.

The new administration also has to consider what from an elite point of view is the greatest sin of all: Israel's assault did not work. Contrary to Israeli bluster about "restoring deterrence" the Gaza assault proved once again that even overwhelming firepower cannot force a people to submit. Palestinian resistance cannot be destroyed by force, and a strategy based on militarism can win short-term victories only at the cost of political defeat.

HEIGHTENED BY THE BROADER CONTEXT

All these factors cut in the direction of Washington readjusting its special relationship with Israel. And they loom especially large at a moment when a new administration is facing a changed landscape of power in today's multipolar world and is trying to minimize the damage (to Washington's own interests) done by Bush-era militarism. And also in a moment of economic crisis where Washington's capacity to fund, fight, and maintain public support for unwinnable foreign wars is much diminished.

So Neocon unilateralism and one-sided reliance on military solutions is out. "Smart power" – more accommodation to other interests and more stress on diplomacy – is in. The new team in Washington doesn't want to cede any larger measure of U.S. control than they are forced to. But they know that keeping any kind of long-term influence in the strategic Middle East requires retreating and retrenching to a certain degree.

A series of signals and steps this last month signal the new administration's moves in that direction.

One of the administration's first moves was to order the closing of Guantánamo and halt the kangaroo court process that had been set up under Bush.

Obama repeated his campaign pledge to "engage" Iran diplomatically and see if mutually beneficial agreements can be reached regarding regional conflicts and the dispute over Tehran's nuclear program. Hillary Clinton restated that point (which was different from her own campaign stance) in her confirmation hearings.

The administration has also subtly shifted its language around Afghanistan. Grandiose claims about winning a military victory are not just discarded but criticized, even by holdover Defense Secretary Robert Gates. Obama now speaks of achieving a "hard-earned peace" and feelers are out toward negotiations with elements within the Taliban-led insurgency. At the same time, more U.S. troops are still being sent and the missile strikes inside Pakistan are continuing. New special envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan Richard Holbrooke speaks of the U.S. being there for years and years ahead. So a turn away from dead-end approaches and disaster on this dangerous flashpoint is yet to take place.

Obama is also taking steps toward the promised draw-down of combat troops from Iraq. The administration has not firmly pledged to meet the 2011 date set in the Status of Forces Agreement for removing all U.S. forces, but top Iraq Commander Ray Odierno is quoted in *The New York Times* (Jan. 29) as saying "By 2011 we'll be zero."

George Mitchell – rather than Israel Lobby favorite Dennis Ross – was appointed special envoy to the Middle East. The significance of this was best articulated by Abraham Foxman, President of the B'nai B'rith Anti-Defamation League and a key figure in the Israel Lobby, who denounced the choice: "Sen. Mitchell is fair. He's been meticulously even-handed, but the fact is, American policy in the Middle East hasn't been even handed, it has been supportive of Israel when it felt Israel needed critical U.S. support."

Perhaps most important of all, however, was an episode that took place while Bush was still in office. *The New York Times* reported (Jan. 11) that Bush had turned down a specific request by Israel for bunker-busting bombs to be used for an attack on Iran's nuclear facilities. Apparently top military leaders and Defense Secretary Gates had strongly opposed Israel's request with arguments that the entire region would hold the U.S. responsible for any such attack and the consequences would be disastrous for U.S. interests.

In some respects the timing of this revelation – just before Obama took office – was as important as the turn-down itself. It was a clear signal that even the Bush administration had begun to distance itself from maximalist Israeli demands. This provides “cover” for his successor to go further. It is an indication that key sections of the policy-making elite beyond Obama's circle believe a shift away from total alignment with Israel is an option to consider. Since U.S. backing for Israel is the toughest nut to crack (of many tough ones) in changing U.S. posture throughout the region, this is no small matter.

CAN SIGNALS AND SMALL STEPS BECOME A DECISIVE TURN?

It is yet to be determined whether these signals and small steps develop into a decisive shift in U.S. policy or stall and become cover for mostly-more-of-the-same.

Powerful forces are pushing for the latter. Diehard U.S. Neocons, down but far from out. A stung Israel Lobby linked to an Israeli leadership hell-bent on more wars and backed by a hawkishness among Israeli Jews that parallels the U.S. just after 9/11. The inertia and habit of imperial behaviors even if, in a best-case scenario, Barack Obama personally believes many of those ought to be discarded.

But there are also grounds for optimism. A new level of pressure from angry tens of millions, from Morocco to Indonesia. A U.S. public that expects change and, in its majority, no longer believes that military force is the way to defeat terrorism or accomplish anything positive in the Middle East. Important new cracks opened up in the Zionist grip on U.S. public opinion. And perhaps most important of all, the fundamental fact that U.S. and Israeli military power cannot solve a single political problem in the Middle East, while exercise of that force makes it harder to address the burning economic and environmental problems that are fueling new grassroots movements and have shaken even most of the U.S. elite into considering new directions.

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