



Israel Over-Reaches

by Nadia Hijab

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What a New Year dawns for the Palestinians of Gaza. More Gazans have been killed in just three days than the entire year of 1988, during the first Palestinian uprising.

Death and destruction cloud history and context. Fact: Israel's punishment of Gaza predates the Hamas take-over in June 2007. It even predates the existence of Hamas.

Israel's siege policies began to take shape back in 1988 when it imposed a "permit system" in Gaza. It introduced closures in 1991 and institutionalized them in 1993. It sealed Gaza off by an electronic wall in 1994. Israel's punishment before and since has included mass home demolitions, air raids, and "targeted assassinations"-- all illegal under international law.

None of Israel's measures have made its people safer. On the contrary, they have bred counter-violations of international law. It was in 2002 -- after 35 years of occupation -- that the first Qassam rocket was launched into Israeli territory.

Hamas now stands accused of refusing to renew the ceasefire by Israel, the Bush Administration, and even Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas.

This ignores the facts. Although the ceasefire largely held for five months, Israel actually tightened its blockade throughout this period. UN supplies were restricted and the UN was unable to maintain its usual reserves. With the complete sealing of the Strip in November, the UN, unprecedentedly, ran out of food.

Hamas is far from perfect but it is not stupid. It could not have agreed to another ceasefire that would maintain a starvation status quo. It wanted one that would lift the siege.

Israel chose instead to go for a coup de grace to bring Hamas to its knees when 1.5 million people lack food, fuel and medicines, and the world is busy with two big holidays.

But Israel may have seriously over-reached and, in the process, damaged its ability to achieve a final settlement of the conflict on its terms, presumably the main point of the assault given that a comprehensive ceasefire would have stopped the rockets.

How? For one thing, Abbas' term ends on January 9. This presents a major challenge to the legitimacy of the entire PA enterprise ushered in by the Oslo Accords. A unilateral renewal of Abbas mandate will be difficult without the appearance of collusion with Israel.

Already, Palestinians in the West Bank have taken to the streets in support of Gaza. Demonstrators have been killed and injured by Israeli and PA fire -- a further blow to the PA's legitimacy.

Israeli Jewish and Palestinian citizens have also poured into the streets, and clashes with police have been reported. The committee representing Israeli Palestinian political parties and civil society groups has called for a general strike and accused Israel of "acts of genocide." It also called for the PA to stop negotiations, for the Arab states to shut down their embassies, and for Egypt to break its siege.

The Israeli assault put Egypt on the spot. The image of Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak shaking hands with Israeli foreign minister Tzipi Livni just before the assault is still vivid. Egypt was already coming under criticism for the closure of its Rafah border with Gaza.

Now Egypt's troops have been forced to fire on Palestinians desperate to escape the Strip. Egypt is stuck. If it opens its borders, Israel may claim that Egypt has responsibility for the Strip. If it keeps them closed, it faces destabilizing popular anger.

Israel has also damaged its relations with its important ally, Turkey, which has quickly condemned the Gaza attacks as a crime against humanity and froze its mediation between Israel and Syria. Syria also suspended peace talks while Saudi King Abdullah called President George W. Bush to urge him to rein in Israel.

A Washington Post editorial drew attention to another own goal, pointing out that Israel's efforts to focus international attention on the Iranian nuclear program have been overshadowed -- an outcome Israel could have avoided by relaxing the economic blockade.

US credibility in the region, already low, took another hit with the Bush Administration's knee-jerk support of Israel's actions and the very visible use of US fighter planes in the Gaza attacks -- violating America's own laws. Israel may find that, rather than presenting the incoming Obama Administration with a fait accompli, it may have made it harder for him to be as accommodating.

Despite the holidays, there are large worldwide demonstrations, a popular outpouring of horror and anger for the first time in 18 months -- since Israel imposed its most draconian siege yet. It is difficult to see how, when the fighting is over, Israel will be able to re-impose it.

Like the American invasion of Iraq, Israel's assault will be remembered for its failure and brutality, a tragedy that should indeed have been avoided.

Nadia Hijab is a Senior Fellow at the Institute for Palestine Studies in Washington D.C. The opinions in this piece are her own.