

The onslaught on Gaza, the far right drift in Israel, and the impact in the region

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Amandla!: What in your view are the factors that gave rise to the latest assault on Gaza and why did it happen at this time? Why has it taken such an exceptionally brutal form?

Gilbert Achcar: The real qualitative escalation in brutality goes along with the drift of Israeli society and polity to the far right. In the late '70s you had the Likud coming to power, and a few years after that you had the invasion of Lebanon that culminated with the Sabra and Shatila massacre - a threshold in horror and mortality was crossed at that time. But that was superseded by the degree of violence in the 2006 war on Lebanon; the intensity of destruction and violence went beyond all Israeli previous wars. And then you had the onslaught of Gaza in December 2008 - January 2009 that was also extremely brutal.

The recent onslaught on Gaza fits this pattern: there is an increasing brutality and violence as well as an increasing disregard by Israel of any consideration for world public opinion. All prior attempts to preserve some kind of image of Israel are completely finished; you have a people who feel authorised to talk the language of brutal force in the age of the so-called war on terror. The post-9/11 perspective gives a green light for state terrorism and state brutality in the name of fighting terror.

The actual reason for the current onslaught is the Netanyahu government's dismay about the reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah, as well as the fact that this reconciliation was actually welcomed, albeit not explicitly, by western governments including Washington. This dismay is not because Hamas is in any way radicalising, but on the contrary because Hamas had to water down its general political line and accept a lot of concessions in order to get this reconciliation with the Palestinian Authority. Paradoxically, the Israeli government is in much more control with a divided Palestinian landscape and a Hamas that is completely demonised than with a reunified Palestinian landscape and a Hamas which is more moderate.

A!: What would the objectives have been because the brutality of the assault surely would have driven all Palestinians closer together?

GA: Its goal is to provoke more radicalisation on the side of Hamas, not on the side of the Palestinian Authority. So actually the gap between the two increased with the onslaught - and in that regard this onslaught achieved its goal. The Israeli government doesn't give a damn about the feeling of the Palestinian people; the issue here is about the Palestinian political entities. It's also a way of removing any possibility for peace initiatives by the Palestinians - with such brutality for instance Hamas would feel that they can no longer move ahead with compromises and offers of peace, as they had been doing just before this terrible onslaught. Ironically, the Israeli government fears these initiatives more than rockets; what they fear most, is anything looking like a peace initiative which could be welcomed by western governments, which could be even tepidly backed by Washington.

They seize any pretext, as they did in this case with the three Israeli teenagers who were assassinated; they immediately accused Hamas even though they had absolutely no evidence. They

seized this opportunity to re-arrest the vast number of Palestinian prisoners released in exchange for Gilad Shalit's release. It was obviously premeditated: they released these guys very reluctantly and they waited for the first pretext to arrest them again in order to tell the Palestinians, look, whatever you do is in vain because we'll end up withdrawing any concession we might have given you. So this is how it started. And then they switched to the pretext of the rocket launchings, after having exacerbated the tensions through their very brutal behaviour when they supposedly were searching for the teenagers. So this led to Palestinian reactions that were very normal and natural. Israel seized these reactions as a pretext to launch the brutal, disproportionate onslaught. As I said, they no longer feel any kind of moral inhibition, and don't give a damn about foreign support or public opinion any longer.

A!: Did Israeli achieve of its objectives with this assault? Is it stronger or is it weaker coming out of this?

GA: First of all, the Israelis suffered casualties because they had to show that they were willing to go inside; limiting themselves to striking from a distance would have been a sign of weakness - everybody knows that there's no match between the ridiculous rockets that come out of Gaza and Israeli firepower. They needed to restore some credibility by involving troops on the ground, but this comes at a high price because you can't put troops in an urban setting without a high cost there.

The worst thing for them, far worse than suffering casualties, is having soldiers taken as prisoners of war (what they call hostages). So they have devised a new strategy in order to reduce this cost: every time one of them is under threat of falling prisoner, they attack full force, risking the killing of the soldier. They prefer to have their own soldiers killed than taken prisoner. This is the politics of naked force. They have no desire for peace. They just want just to crush the Palestinians with their military superiority, to terrorise them, because this is a terroristic state in the whole and full meaning of the term. The only thing they want is military dominance, full military supremacy.

A!: In this assault, the Israelis were fairly successful in terrorising people, but they didn't subdue anybody, and they provoked huge international outcry. So can we say that this mission has backfired?

GA: Not in the minds of the Israeli far-right power block at present. This could have been the case with the old generation of Zionists. But what you have unfolding under the guise of the war on terror is the notion that fighting a horrible enemy justifies resorting to all kinds of horrible methods. And the present Israeli far-right government is the most extreme embodiment of this.

They simply don't care about public opinion in general. What they of course would care about is the US government, but in that respect, Netanyahu has been behaving as a player in US politics, very directly trying to play on the contradictions within the U.S. And they are quite effective at this game, all the more because Obama is a total wimp especially in relation to Israel. And now you've recently had Hilary Clinton - who will certainly be the Democratic candidate and likely also the next president - endorsing Netanyahu's policy fully. This is what counts for Netanyahu. He doesn't care about public opinion, petitions, blah, blah, blah.

A!: It seems that the more brutal, the more hard-core and more right-wing the government behaves, the stronger is the support of the Israeli people. There's virtually no voice of opposition.

GA: Yes, absolutely, this is also an appalling side of things. Again, it's this war on terror thing. It's the stupid argument of the rockets from Gaza, and many of those who would have worked in '82 in anti-war demonstrations now support the war waged by the Israeli government in the name of

opposing terror. The Hamas factor also is quite important in that regard. Sharon did everything he could to weaken, discredit, destroy Yasser Arafat, and hence Hamas could emerge among the Palestinians. He would torpedo any kind of compromise or peace politics promoted by Arafat, and provoke the Palestinians, knowing that this would lead to reactions especially from the likes of Hamas. Then he would seize this as a pretext to escalate their oppression and enter into the cycle of violence that benefited both Hamas on the Palestinian side and himself, Ariel Sharon, on the Israeli side. So these dialectics of extremes promoted by the Israeli side have been continuous. Abbas has done everything but totally capitulate, yet they keep discrediting him because, as I said, this Israeli government doesn't want any peace partner on the Palestinian side; they don't want peace - period.

A!: What impact has the conflict in Israel/Palestine had generally on the political situation in the Middle East?

GA: Basically it's a further factor in radicalising the populations in the Arab world. You have increasing resentment because they've seen these tragedies unfolding, especially the one in Syria that dwarfs any other tragedy now. To be fair, even during the onslaught on Gaza you had more people killed every day in Syria than you had in Gaza. And the fact that this was allowed to go on created such resentment that it enabled the rise of ISIS -- ultra fundamentalist fanatical radicalisation to the point that Al-Quada now appears moderate.

A!: Is this resentment and radicalisation always going to lead to the rise of religious fundamentalists rather than more secular democratic forces coming to the fore?

GA: Radicalisation and resentment do not lead in and of themselves to the development of this or that force; everything depends on the kind of subjective factors that exist and that can interact with these objective factors of radicalisation. This region has started what I call a long-term revolutionary process in 2011 that will go on for decades. When you have a revolutionary process, it's not linear; it's not one victory after the other until you have the red flag over some palace. It can get very nasty; you can see terrible counter revolutionary moments. The dominant perspective in the region is counter revolutionary with the developments in Syria (the resilience of the Assad regime) and in Egypt (Sisi), as well as the development of ISIS. But that's a moment in a long-term process.

This moment has been enabled by the failure of any potential left-wing forces in the region to act independently to build an alternative to both the old regime and to the Islamic forces. So you have the old regimes on the one hand, and you have Islamic forces on the other hand. But both are deeply counter-revolutionary forces. If there's no emergence of a third progressive popular force constituting an alternative, then we are stuck with this binary and with the dialectics of moving to the extreme on both sides of this binary. The old regime gets nastier (Sisi is actually nastier than Mubarak) and the Islamic side gets nastier (ISIS is much nastier than anything the Muslim Brotherhood represented). So you have a dialectics of extreme radicalisation on both sides of a counter-revolutionary binary in the absence of a progressive popular alternative.

A!: Wasn't there an alternative when the masses of people in Tunisia and in Egypt came onto the street in a democratic, secular movement?. Has that been preserved anywhere?

GA: The potential is there - not just a theoretical potential, but an actual potential. It's uneven from country to country. In Tunisia, it's embodied in the trade union UTT, which is by far the most important organised social and political force in the country. The problem is that it needs a different strategy.

The same goes for Egypt: you had a very strong, a very big potential of which we had a glimpse in 2012 when the left-nationalist candidate came third in the presidential elections. He got close to five

million votes. So this showed a huge potential, quite comparable in size to both camps of counter-revolution represented by the old regime and the Muslim Brotherhood. And yet this was squandered by the Egyptian left when it moved between an alliance with the Muslim Brotherhood to an alliance with the But the potential is still there, and the youth is still radicalised; it did not vote for Sisi and this is very important. Participation in the last presidential election was very low and they rigged the vote anyhow with this ridiculous 95% for Sisi.

Even in Syria the local co-ordination committees represented a very important progressive potential; but this was dissipated when these committees accepted the so-called national council, formed in Istanbul, and dominated by the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. Since then we have been paying the price: the Syrian situation got caught between this weak official opposition and the very brutal regime which led to the emergence of a more radical Islamic opposition represented by a myriad of groups, most important of which is ISIS.

And so the aspirations of the Syrian revolution have been crushed between these two counter-revolutionary forces – the regime on the one hand and the fanatical Islamic fundamentalists on the other. But the potential is still there with tens of thousands of people, including the youth, opposing the regime. The regime arrested thousands of progressives who were organising the uprising while at the same time releasing Jihadists from jail. So the regime itself fostered by every possible means the emergence of the hard-line Islamic tendency in the opposition. Because this suits the regime, exactly as Islamic radicalisation suits the Israeli right-wing. They are playing the same game.

A!: And is a side getting the upper hand in the conflict now?

GA: Two years ago Assad was on the verge of defeat, and that's when Iran decided to intervene on the ground not only by giving him support, but by sending troops; because of the language factor, they sent Arab troops of Iran's allies – Lebanon, Hezbollah, and Iraq. And these forces helped the regime in launching a successful counter-offensive and regaining a lot of the ground that they had lost in the previous periods. However, the ISIS phenomenon is creating constraints on Iran and the Iraqis who have to fight on different fronts now. In addition to fighting the mainstream Syrian opposition, they have to worry about ISIS because Iraq also is a major stronghold of Iranian influence in the region. There are signs of exhaustion within the Syrian regime, the military basis of which is relatively thin.

So despite all appearances presently, the Syrian regime is again facing problems, but it is invoking the so-called war on terror. You can see here the similarities between the Syrian regime, Egypt, and the Israeli government. They all speak the same language, the language of the war of terror, and in the name of this war on terror they want a carte blanche for all brutalities. And now they are telling Washington, look, you see you have ISIS and all that – we are your best friends, supporting us will be in your interest.

A!: And the US attitude to the emergence of ISIS, is it one of containment rather than eradication?

GA: Your choice of terms is correct. Presently it is contained; that is they intervened to stop the advance by ISIS, but they didn't want to move back from containment before achieving a political goal. Washington sees this ISIS business as a leverage to get rid of Maliki and to reduce Iranian influence in Iraq – because Maliki has become very closely connected to Iran, and the tensions between Maliki and Washington have been increasing since the end of the direct US military presence in Iraq in 2011. Their relations with Maliki have deteriorated to the point that Maliki even went to Moscow to discuss an arms deal. Actually Sisi is doing the same – so you can see how much Washington is losing ground in the region. Now with ISIS there, Iraq is dependent on US military

support because a lot of the US weaponry there has been seized by ISIS. The U.S. has set conditions for enhancing their support, demanding the departure of Maliki. They got what they wanted: Maliki has stepped down and been replaced.

Washington would like to repeat what it did in 2006 after losing ground in the face of Al-Qaeda. At that point, the U.S. bought the Sunni tribes, the very constituency that Al-Qaeda was developing among. They managed in that way to turn the Sunni tribes into allies of the United States, thus practically eradicating Al-Qaeda in Iraq. What we are seeing now is a repetition of that strategy; now the Sunni tribes have become completely alienated by the sectarian attitude of Maliki, backed by Iran. So much resentment is building among them, that when ISIS came they just aligned with ISIS. Now what we have got is not ISIS alone taking over parts of Iraq; it's ISIS plus the Arab Sunni forces, tribes, other groups, etcetera. And this is what happened in Iraq previously when, after the massacre in Fallujah in 2004, the Sunnis became so alienated that they let Al-Qaeda in and backed it until Washington changed its strategy. So now we are seeing a repetition of the same scenario, the Sunni tribes having this time allowed ISIS in, with Washington wanting to get to the same strategy of alliance with the Sunni tribes, but for this they had to remove Maliki. This is now achieved and we'll see what will be the next step.

Interview with Gilbert Achcar by Brian Ashley, August 2014

P.S.

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