

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article3586>



Palestine

Gaza and the impact in the region

- IV Online magazine - 2014 - IV476 - September 2014 -

Publication date: Sunday 7 September 2014

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Gilbert Achcar spoke to Brian Ashley of the South African magazine [Amandla!](#) in August 2014.

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 escalation in brutality is not new: it goes along with the long drift of the Israeli society and polity to the far right. The Likud, the main force in the Zionist far right, came to power in 1977, and led a few years later, in 1982, the criminal invasion of Lebanon that culminated with the Sabra and Shatila massacre – the most murderous of Israel's wars until that year. A threshold in horror and brutality against civilian populations was crossed at that time. But that was superseded in intensity of destruction and violence by the 2006 Israeli onslaught on Lebanon. And then you had the onslaught on Gaza in December 2008 – January 2009 that was equally brutal, and still more murderous on civilians given the density of population in Gaza and their inability to flee out of the strip.

The most recent onslaught on Gaza neatly fits in this evolving pattern of ever increasing brutality and violence, as well as increasing Israeli disregard of global public opinion. Prior attempts to preserve a “peace-seeking” image of Israel are old story; the Israeli governments now feel authorised to speak the language of brutal force in the age of the so-called War on Terror. This post-9/11 US-sponsored perspective gave a green light for naked Israeli state terrorism and state brutality in the name of fighting terror.

As for the actual reason of the current onslaught on Gaza, it is the Netanyahu government's exasperation about the reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah, as well as the fact that this reconciliation was actually welcomed, albeit not very explicitly, by Western governments, including Washington. The Israeli government's exasperation is not because Hamas is “radicalising” in any way, but on the contrary because – due to the Egyptian turn of events since 2013 – it had to water down its general political line and make a lot of concessions on the way to its reconciliation with the West Bank Palestinian Authority (PA). The truth is that the Israeli government feels much more comfortable with a divided Palestinian landscape and a Hamas that is easy to demonise than with a unified Palestinian landscape and a more moderate Hamas. Ever since the 1993 Oslo agreement, the actual game of the Israeli far right in government has always been to weaken the “moderate” Palestinians, from Arafat to Abbas, and push towards a radicalisation benefitting Hamas – the latter being their “preferred enemy” as long as it can easily be demonised, since it makes their relation with the US and Europe much more consensual and reduces Western pressure on them. Remember that the most brutal Israeli onslaught on Hamas/Gaza came after the Islamic movement's shift away from suicide attacks into political action, including its participation in the 2006 elections after having rejected such elections for many years as illegitimate in contrast to armed struggle.

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

GA: Its goal has been to provoke a renewed radicalisation of Hamas, driving a wedge anew between the Islamic movement and the PA. Indeed the gap between the two initially increased with the onslaught – and in that regard the onslaught seemed to be achieving its goal for a while. But the resentment it created among all Palestinians is such that the PA had to express solidarity with Hamas-led Gaza. The Israeli government doesn't give a damn about the feelings of the Palestinian people. It essentially wanted to torpedo the drive towards peace initiatives on the Palestinian side: the calculation was that, faced with such Israeli brutality, Hamas would deem that they can no longer move ahead with moderation and compromise, as they had been doing just before the recent onslaught.

Ironically, the Israeli government fears Palestinian peace initiatives much more than they fear rockets launched from Gaza: what they resent most are any Palestinian moves that may be welcomed by Western governments and backed by Washington, albeit tepidly.

For their purpose, they can seize any pretext, as they did in the present case with the three Israeli teenagers abducted and assassinated in the West Bank. They immediately accused Hamas without any evidence, exactly like the Bush administration accused Iraq of standing behind 9/11 in 2001: a pretext for premeditated goals. They seized the triple assassination as an opportunity to re-arrest a large number of those Palestinian political prisoners who had been released in exchange for Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit held as POW in Gaza. This was obviously a premeditated arrest campaign: the Israeli government had released these men very reluctantly and was waiting for the first pretext to re-arrest them in order to tell the Palestinians that whatever they do in this respect is in vain because Israel will end up withdrawing any concession it might have made under pressure.

So this is how it started. And then the Netanyahu government switched to the pretext of the rocket launchings, after having purposely exacerbated the tensions through their very brutal behaviour in the West Bank under the pretext of searching for the teenagers. This brutality led naturally to Palestinian reactions of anger. Israel seized the latter in turn as a pretext to launch its brutal, completely “disproportionate” onslaught without any kind of moral inhibition – aside from utterly hypocritical 6-minute warnings before destroying civilian buildings over their inhabitants in the middle of the night!

AI: Did Israel achieve any of its objectives with this assault? Is it stronger or is it weaker coming out of this? How about the Israeli military casualties?

GA: The Israelis suffered casualties because they had to show that they were willing to go inside Gaza in order to restore their “credibility” as a military power. Limiting themselves to striking from a distance would have been seen as a sign of weakness: everybody knows that there’s no match between the hand-made rockets that come out of Gaza and Israel’s formidable firepower. The Israeli government needed then to restore lost “credibility” by involving troops on the ground, but this comes at a high price because you can’t engage troops in a hostile urban setting without incurring casualties.

The worst thing for the Israeli side actually, far worse than suffering casualties, is having soldiers taken as POWs (what they call “hostages”). So they have devised a new strategy in order to minimize that risk: every time an Israeli soldier is under threat of falling prisoner, they attack full force, with a high risk of killing the soldier. Thus, they prefer to kill their own soldiers than to see them taken as prisoners for a later exchange with Palestinian political prisoners. Israel’s is the politics of naked force. It has no desire for peace whatsoever. They just want to crush the Palestinians with their military superiority, they want to terrorise them: they behave as a terroristic state in the whole and full meaning of the term. They only believe in military dominance, full military supremacy.

AI: 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 far-right power block presently ruling Israel. This could have been seen as a major problem by 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 means. And the present Israeli far-right government is the most extreme embodiment of this logic.

They simply don’t care about world public opinion in general. What they of course would care about is the US public opinion inasmuch as it affects the US government’s behaviour, but in that respect, Netanyahu has been openly

behaving as a shrewd player in US politics, very directly trying to exploit the political divisions within the U.S., cozying up to the Republican right, etc. And he has been quite effective at this game, all the easier in that Obama is the ultimate wimp indeed, especially in relation to Israel. And Hilary Clinton – who will most likely be the Democratic candidate in 2016 with a high chance of becoming the next president – has recently fully endorsed Netanyahu's policy. This is what counts for Netanyahu. He doesn't care about public opinion, petitions of intellectuals, and the like.

AI: 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. It looks like there's virtually no voice of opposition.

GA: Yes, indeed, this is also an appalling side of the story. It's again the War on Terror neurosis, in this case the demonization of Hamas and the inept argument of the rockets from Gaza. Many of those Israelis who would have marched in anti-war demonstrations in 1982 now support the war waged by their government in the name of opposing "terror". The Hamas factor is quite important in that regard. Sharon did everything he could to weaken, discredit, destroy Yasser Arafat, enabling Hamas to build up support among the Palestinians. He provoked the Palestinians deliberately and repeatedly, knowing that this would lead to reactions especially from groups like Hamas. Then he would each time seize this as a pretext to escalate the oppression of the Palestinians and fuel the cycle of violence that benefited both Hamas on the Palestinian side, and himself, Ariel Sharon, on the Israeli side. These dialectics of extremes promoted by the Israeli far right have been continuous. Abbas went very far in capitulating to US/Israeli conditions, yet the Israelis keep discrediting him because, as already mentioned, this Israeli government doesn't want any "peace partner"; they simply don't want peace!

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

GA: Basically it is one factor among others of radicalisation in the Arab world. Popular resentment is building up rapidly in the face of the unfolding of multiple tragedies, especially the tragedy in Syria that dwarfs all others. The truth is that even during the onslaught on Gaza, there were more people killed every day in Syria than in Gaza. And the fact that this was allowed to go on created such deep resentment among Syrians that it greatly facilitated the resistible rise of ISIS – an ultra-fundamentalist fanatical organisation compared to which Al-Qaeda's local branch now looks moderate!

AI: Are 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; it all depends on the existing subjective factors that can interact with the objective factors of radicalisation. This region embarked in 2011 on what I call a long-term revolutionary process, one that will carry on for decades. A revolutionary process is never linear: it's not one victory after the other until you see the red flag flying over some palace. It can get very nasty, and go through terrible counter-revolutionary moments. The dominant trend in the Arab region is counter-revolutionary at present, especially with the developments in Syria (the resilience of the Assad regime) and in Egypt (Sisi), and the spread of ISIS. But that's only one phase in a long-term process.

This phase has been enabled by the failure of potential left-wing forces in the region to act independently in building an alternative to both the old regimes and the Islamic forces. The old regimes and the Islamic fundamentalist opposition are both deeply counter-revolutionary forces. If there's no emergence of a third pole, a progressive popular force able to constitute an alternative, we will remain stuck with this binary and with the dialectics of moving to the extreme on both sides. The old regime gets nastier (Sisi is actually nastier than Mubarak) and the Islamic fundamentalist opposition gets nastier (ISIS is definitely much nastier than anything the Muslim Brotherhood represented). So what you have basically is a dialectics-of-extremes type of radicalisation on both sides of a counter-revolutionary binary in the absence of a progressive popular alternative.

AI: 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 still there – not just a theoretical potential, but an actual potential. It's uneven from country to country, to be sure. In Tunisia, it is embodied in the trade union centre, the UGTT, which is by far the most important organised social and political force in the country. The problem there is one of strategy.

The same goes for Egypt: there is a big, important potential of which we had a glimpse in 2012 when the left-nationalist Nasserist candidate came third in the presidential election, with close to five million votes. This showed a huge potential, quite comparable in size to both camps of the counter-revolution represented by the old regime on the one hand, and the Muslim Brotherhood on the other. And yet this opportunity was squandered by the Egyptian left-Nasserists when they shifted from their 2011 alliance with the Muslim Brotherhood to an alliance with Sisi in 2013. But the potential is still there, and the youth is still radicalised; it did not vote for Sisi, and this is crucial. Participation in the last presidential election was so low that they needed to prolong it by one more day in order to mobilize potential electors in their effort to give some credibility to Sisi's grotesque 95%.

In Syria, the Local Co-ordination Committees that led the uprising in its first phase represented a very important progressive potential; but this was dissipated when these same committees recognized the so-called National Council, established in Istanbul and dominated by the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood from within, and Qatar and Turkey from without. Since then, the Syrian situation has been caught between an inefficient and corrupt official opposition and a very brutal regime: this led to the emergence of a more radical Islamic opposition represented by a myriad of groups, the most important of which is now ISIS.

Thus, the aspirations of the Syrian revolution have been crushed between these two counter-revolutionary poles – 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, especially young people, opposing the regime from a progressive perspective. The regime arrested thousands of those young progressives who were organising the uprising in its initial phase while at the same time releasing Jihadists from jail. The Syrian regime itself fostered by every possible means the emergence and prevalence of the hard-line Islamic tendency among the opposition. This suits the regime, exactly as Islamic radicalisation among Palestinians suits the Israeli far-right. They are both playing the same game of enhancing their "preferred enemies".

AI: 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 move beyond material support and intervene massively on the ground by sending troops to shore up the regime. Because of the language factor, they sent Arab troops from Iran's regional sectarian satellites: Hezbollah from Lebanon, and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq from Iraq. These forces helped the regime in launching a successful counter-offensive and regaining a lot of the ground that it had lost heretofore. However, the ISIS phenomenon is creating constraints on Iran and its allies who must fight on two fronts now, in both Syria and Iraq. In addition to fighting the mainstream Syrian opposition, they have now to counter ISIS's spread into Iraq, which is a major stronghold of Iranian influence in the region. The scattering of Iran-backed forces led to signs of exhaustion appearing within the Syrian regime, whose own sectarian reliable military basis is relatively thin.

So despite all appearances, the Syrian regime is presently encountering difficulties again, but it is more than ever invoking the WOT argument to ward off the prospect of increased Western support to the mainstream opposition. Basically, the Syrian regime is competing with that mainstream opposition in trying to convince Western powers that they are their best allies in the War on Terror! You can see here the similarities between the Syrian regime, the Egyptian regime, and the Israeli government. They all speak the same language, the language of WOT, and it is in

the name of this WOT that they request a carte blanche for all sorts of violence. They are all telling Washington: "We are your best friends, supporting us will be in your best interest".

AI: Isn't the US attitude to the emergence of ISIS one of containment rather than eradication?

GA: Your choice of terms is correct. It is containment that prevailed until now: the U.S. intervened to stop ISIS's advance, but it doesn't want to move beyond containment before achieving a political goal. Washington saw this ISIS outbreak as a leverage to get rid of Maliki and reduce Iranian influence in Iraq. Maliki had indeed become increasingly dependent on Iran, and the tensions between him and Washington had steadily increased since the end of direct US military presence in Iraq in 2011. Maliki's relations with Washington deteriorated to the point that he went to Moscow to discuss an arms deal. Sisi is doing the same, incidentally, as a gesture of protest against US reluctance to fully endorse him. You can thus see how much ground Washington is losing in the region. However, with ISIS in Iraq, the Iraqi state needs the U.S. It is dependent on US military support because its army was reconstructed with US weaponry after the 2003 invasion, and a lot of this weaponry have fallen in the hands of ISIS. The U.S. has set conditions in order to enhance its support to the Iraqi state, starting with the departure of Maliki. They got what they wanted: Maliki stepped down and has been replaced.

Washington is now trying to repeat what it did in 2006 after losing ground in the face of Al-Qaeda. At that point, the U.S. bought off the Sunni tribes, the very constituency among which Al-Qaeda was developing. Washington even succeeded in turning the Sunni tribes into US allies, thus managing to practically eradicate Al-Qaeda in Iraq. What we are seeing now is a repetition of that same strategy: the Sunni tribes have been completely alienated by the sectarian attitude of Maliki, backed by Iran. So much resentment has been building among them that they aligned with ISIS when it crashed in. The fact is that it is not ISIS alone that took over large parts of Iraq, but ISIS in alliance with the Arab Sunni forces: tribes, remnants of Saddam Hussein's Baath party, and others. This is what happened in Iraq previously, after the massacre in Fallujah in 2004, when the Sunnis became so alienated that they let Al-Qaeda in, and backed it until Washington changed its strategy. We are seeing now a remake of the same scenario, the Sunni tribes having this time allowed ISIS in, with Washington wanting to renew the strategy of alliance with them. For this they needed to get rid of Maliki. This is now achieved and we'll see how the next stage will unfold.