

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article3646>



Palestine

# Lessons of Gaza

- IV Online magazine - 2014 - IV477 - October 2014 -

Publication date: Monday 6 October 2014

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**The recent aggression against Gaza has once again demonstrated the destructive and murderous madness that the State of Israel is capable of demonstrating when it comes to crushing the Palestinian people, their organizations and their national aspirations. Nearly 2,200 dead, over 11,000 injured, tens of thousands of partially or completely destroyed buildings, more than 500,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) (30 per cent of the population) ... These figures make you dizzy, especially if you think about the size of this small coastal strip, once again the victim of an "offensive" that is nothing short of a massacre. A cease-fire was finally reached at the end of August. Its terms and conditions indicate that while it is inappropriate to speak of "victory" of the Palestinians, we have witnessed a political and military defeat of the State of Israel.**

### **False pretexts and real goals**

Many people have raised the question of the timing of this new aggression, in order to understand the real objectives of the State of Israel, beyond the eternal pretext of rocket attacks from the Gaza Strip, which was already invoked in the previous bombing campaign in November 2012. At that time Israel already claimed to be intervening for the sole purpose of "protecting" its people from rocket attacks. However, before the start of the offensive in 2012, no Israeli had been killed by a rocket for over a year. History repeats itself: Gaza has suffered this summer a deluge of iron and fire, while the last time an Israeli died due to rocket fire... was in November 2012, during the previous Israeli operation.

Without wishing to go into gruesome details, let us recall a few facts: in the seven years since Hamas took control of Gaza, and before the last attack, seventeen Israelis had been killed by rocket fire, ten of them during the "Cast Lead" (winter 2008-2009) and "Pillar of Defence" (November 2012) operations. In other words, more than half of the victims of rocket attacks were killed during Israeli operations, and the figure of seventeen must be compared with more than 2,000, the number of Gazans killed during the same period ... an imbalance that reflects the reality of the military relationship of forces, making it all the more scandalous to talk about the "threats" and "violence," of which the State of Israel is supposedly the victim and against which it is only "defending itself".

The real reasons for the attack must be sought elsewhere. For Netanyahu, it was first of all an operation of domestic policy. At the head of a coalition of the right, the far right and the settlers, Netanyahu chose once again brutality in order to satisfy partners and an electorate that are united in their hatred of the Palestinians. After the discovery of the bodies of the three young Israelis who had gone missing near a West Bank settlement and the sharp increase in violence against Palestinians, Netanyahu chose to respond to hate speech by striking at the population of Gaza, to which it is however totally fanciful to attribute the deaths of three Israelis near Hebron ...

The operation was secondly aimed at diverting international attention which, over the previous few weeks, had focused on the West Bank, Jerusalem and Israel, with increasing calls for hatred and revenge, followed by acts: from the horrible death of the young Mohammed Abu Khdeir (burned alive) to the beating up by the police of his cousin Tariq, to the racist attacks carried out by settlers, the dozens of criminal actions committed at that time showed, for anyone who refused to see it, the true face of the violence and racism of the State of Israel, for which the primary responsibility falls of course on the Israeli leaders themselves, despite their hypocritical and insincere statements condemning the atrocities committed against the Palestinians.

### **Breaking Palestinian national unity?**

A third factor must be taken into account, without however being overestimated: the "reconciliation" agreement signed at the end of April by Hamas and the PLO, and the establishment of a government of "national agreement" in early June. This agreement, even though it is highly unfavourable to Hamas (see below), was intolerable to the State of Israel, to the extent that it helped normalize Hamas on the regional, but also international political scene, all the more so after the recognition by the European Union and the United States of the legitimacy of a government formally supported by the two main components of the Palestinian national movement.

One of the constant features of Israeli policy towards the Palestinians is in fact the will of the colonial authorities (in the grand tradition of colonialism) to choose their own representatives of the colonized people, and therefore the potential interlocutors of hypothetical negotiations. From the boycott of the PLO, designated as a "terrorist organization", in the 1970s and 1980s to the refusal to recognize the results of the January 2006 elections (won by Hamas) via the marginalization of Yasser Arafat in the early 2000s, Israeli leaders have indeed always wanted to impose on the Palestinians to "choose" "representatives" who correspond to the aspirations of Israel, and not to the interests of those most concerned.

In this sense President Mahmud Abbas was the ideal partner for Israel, for at least two reasons, seemingly contradictory: he has been known for decades for his "moderation" and his ability to accept "compromises" that look more like surrender; in other words he is ready to abandon the defence of the essential content of Palestinian national rights in exchange for some material and symbolic advantages; since the victory of Hamas in January 2006 and the Fatah-Hamas war in Gaza in the summer of 2007, Abbas has had no power and no control over the Gaza Strip, and cannot therefore claim to have the support of all Palestinians in the occupied territories.

A tendency to capitulate and weak legitimacy are in the eyes of Israel the main qualities of the President of the Palestinian Authority (a president whose term expired more than five years ago ...), to the extent that they allow the occupying power to maintain the illusion of a hypothetical "negotiated process", to which Abbas regularly gives some credence by taking part in negotiations under American patronage; the Israelis know perfectly well that Abbas is unable to impose on the Palestinians any "peace agreement" that would amount to a capitulation. Abbas is an essential piece in the process of transformation by Israel of a provisional situation into a permanent one: "Yes, we occupy, we colonize, we expel, we imprison, but all that will not last, the proof is that we negotiate with the representatives of the Palestinians".

The reconciliation agreement, fragile as it was, partly changed the situation: Mahmud Abbas would indeed have been able to claim to have a new legitimacy, and what is essential, Hamas would have been symbolically associated with the negotiations and thus recognized as a potentially legitimate interlocutor on the international stage. An intolerable situation for Israel, which refuses that a Palestinian organization which has not refused to disarm and is strongly implanted in the society of Gaza and the West Bank should be able to acquire the status of a legitimate representative of the Palestinians in the eyes of the countries of the region, but also in Western countries. Hence the offensive this summer, one of whose major goals was to push Hamas to make mistakes and to once again cast discredit on the Islamic resistance movement by making it appear as a "terrorist organization."

### **Bringing out the contradictions of Hamas**

The signature by Hamas of the reconciliation agreement last April should indeed be seen as a significant shift in the orientation and strategy of the movement. The terms of the agreement were in fact very unfavourable for it and the "government of national unity" that was set up a few weeks later looked like nothing so much as the government that had existed up till then in Ramallah: "The Cabinet of the agreement is thus the continuation of the unilateral and illegal practice that preceded it (the same Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Ministers, Ministers of Foreign Affairs, the Economy, Planning, Health, and Jerusalem Affairs); just as before the "reconciliation", the Cabinet, and especially the Prime Minister, are simply puppets of the presidency, devoid of any legislative investiture " [\[1\]](#).

This clear retreat by Hamas is understandable in the light of recent regional developments and of the realization by the Islamic resistance movement of its growing isolation and the risks that it incurs by its inability to improve even slightly the living conditions of the inhabitants of Gaza. Whereas the year 2012 had been a real blessing for Hamas, the regional dynamics since the summer of 2013 have been very bad for it and have forced it to accept an agreement with Mahmud Abbas, under Egyptian patronage. Let us remember that in the context of the dynamics of the (badly named) "Arab Spring", Hamas had acquired an unprecedented status. The boycott of the movement, decreed by the vast majority of Arab states following the 2006 elections, had been seriously breached. In January 2012, Ismail Haniyyah, Prime Minister of the government of Gaza, was welcomed as a guest by the new Tunisian authorities; in July, he was officially received by the newly elected Egyptian President, Mohammed Morsi, a meeting unthinkable during the Mubarak era, which was accompanied by a considerable easing of the blockade on the Egyptian side; the high-profile visit of the Emir of Qatar to Gaza at the end of October was the final event that consecrated the new regional centrality of Hamas as a political actor.

But the evolution of the situation in Tunisia, the putsch against Mohammed Morsi in the summer of 2013, the massive repression against the Muslim Brotherhood that ensued, the deterioration of the situation in Syria, as well as the meanderings of Qatar, a political dwarf that dreamed of becoming a diplomatic giant, have significantly eroded this centrality, thereby revealing its precarious character. The strengthening of the blockade of Gaza resulting from the accession to power in Egypt of Marshal Sissi, the drying up of financial aid from Iran, which was not very satisfied with the anti-Assad positions adopted by Hamas, and the refusal of the Palestinian Authority (PA) in Ramallah to pay the salaries of civil servants hired by Hamas in Gaza, put Hamas in a perilous situation: "The risk of a social explosion against [the authorities in Gaza] became a plausible hypothesis, since the blockade could not eternally exonerate it from any responsibility, in a situation where no major change in the diplomatic situation was to be expected in the short term." [2]

These are the reasons that led a severely weakened Hamas to accept a "reconciliation" that was not really one, to the extent that the agreement contained essentially technical provisions (merging of civil services, return of the Presidential Guard to Gaza, organization of general elections, etc.) but by no means a political programme.

This "reconciliation" was the result of two weakened actors and was contested on the Palestinian political scene. Let us not forget that in the last election held in the West Bank, namely the municipal elections in autumn 2012, the defeat of Mahmud Abbas was almost complete, despite the boycott of Hamas: low level of interest (few candidates, 80 towns with no list), low participation (only 50 per cent, as against 73 per cent in the previous election), and especially the defeat of the majority of Fatah candidates who were supported by the Abbas leadership (in general, they were beaten by Fatah dissidents, as in Nablus, Jenin and Ramallah).

The "reconciliation" is thus in reality tantamount to "a kind of cease-fire between two rival brothers [who have] decided to put off any definitive metamorphosis of the Palestinian situation, while at the same time knowing how to adapt to the changes in the regional and international situation" [3]. For Hamas, this involved in particular waiving (temporarily?) the exercise (and the wear and tear) of power in the structures of the Palestinian Authority, refocusing on its more traditional activities (network of associations, management of mosques) while breaking out of isolation and becoming once again an element of the Palestinian political scene that could not be ignored. This was a pragmatic attitude on the part of the Islamic resistance movement, which was able to draw the balance sheet of the experience of Mohammed Morsi and its own experience in power, and which put it in contradiction with its own rank and file, which was more convinced of the need to pursue the resistance against Israel than to (co)manage the apparatus of a puppet state.

This significant inflection was unacceptable to the State of Israel, which cannot tolerate a Hamas that is in the process of normalizing and is inclined to compromise, any more than is Palestinian "unity", as formal as it is, acceptable. The offensive this summer was essentially directed against Hamas, with the arrest of hundreds of activists and dozens of cadres in the West Bank and a large-scale offensive against the military apparatus of Hamas in Gaza, aimed at weakening the structures of the movement and pushing Hamas to return to the path that it had

abandoned for nearly two years, that of armed resistance. The State of Israel could thus hope to kill two birds with one stone: temporarily put Hamas out of action and compel Abbas to abandon any agreement with an organization that was "hostile to peace": "The Israeli offensive is therefore absolutely not a response to some radicalization of the Palestinians or of Hamas. On the contrary, it is an offensive against the concessions made by Hamas and against the Palestinian reconciliation" [4].

### **Political and military defeat of Israel**

The least that can be said is that Israel has not achieved its goals, or only very partially and in a collateral manner. Hamas does not come out weakened, but rather strengthened by this new offensive, during which it notably demonstrated unprecedented military capabilities. Despite the impressive Israeli deployment, including the recall of 60,000 reservists and the development of a firepower that Gaza had never experienced, including during the offensives of winter 2008-2009 and autumn 2012, Hamas (and the other Palestinian resistance organizations) to a large extent "held out". The firing of rockets, even though they caused Israel very few casualties, never ceased, and especially the Israeli ground invasion resulted in the deaths of more than 60 soldiers, incapable of neutralizing the armed groups and really controlling the neighbourhoods invaded. The "cease-fire" was therefore signed while Israel had absolutely failed to attain its military objectives.

What is more, despite the terrible human suffering and the material damage caused by the Israeli aggression, the inhabitants of Gaza did not, in their majority, abandon their support for the armed fighters, as was particularly evidenced by the strong attendance at the funeral of the three military commanders of Hamas assassinated in mid-August by Israel and the repeated appeals by personalities and organizations of civil society in Gaza supporting the right of Palestinians to resort to armed struggle. Another indication: contrary to what happened in the winter of 2008-2009, Mahmud Abbas and his supporters were unable to denounce Hamas or to blame it for the tragedy that Gaza experienced this summer. It was national unity that prevailed, and we could even see a certain number of Palestinian diplomats representing the authorities in Ramallah speaking on Western television channels to affirm their support for all Palestinian organizations, including Hamas, and for armed struggle.

Even though the Gazan population had many grievances against Hamas, it was able to put things into perspective: "There was an accumulation of grievances against Hamas, which is perfectly understandable. People attributed their misfortune and misery to the presence of Hamas, especially after the Egyptian turnaround. For Gazans, Egypt is fundamental. And to know that those who govern them are the new bogeymen of the regime in Cairo is not easy. However, Gazans see also that the Israeli offensive took place at a time when Hamas was beginning to take the turn that everyone wished for. That is to say, reconciliation and a change of course, on a more moderate line, to break out of the asphyxia that has been their lot for so long" [5]. A "moderation" which was also embodied even in the terms of the "cease-fire" finally obtained at the end of August.

### **No victory for the Palestinians**

The Palestinian demands with regard to the cease-fire testify indeed to the absence of any "radicality" in the Palestinian camp. What were these demands? The lifting of the blockade, of course, which particularly involves the opening of the borders with Israel and Egypt, the reconstruction of the port and airport (destroyed and closed since the end of 2000) in Gaza, the extension to 10 kilometres of the fishing zone off the coast of Gaza. As pointed out by the lawyer Francesca Albanese, who has worked for eight years for the UN, "none of these demands are new. The United Nations, among others, has regularly demanded the lifting of the siege, a siege that is illegal under international law, as a necessary condition for ending the disastrous humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip. Facilitating the movement of goods and people between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip had already been stipulated in the Agreement on Movement and Access (AMA) signed between the government of Israel and the Palestinian Authority in 2005. Even the building of a port and the possibility of an airport in Gaza had been stipulated

in the AMA, while their actual implementation never followed. The request to expand the permitted fishing zone is less than that envisaged in the Oslo Accords in 1994 and it was already part of the arrangement of the cease-fire in 2012 " [6].

There is nothing "maximalist" or "radical" in such demands, which simply reflect the minimum necessary for the subsistence of the people of Gaza, and which are recognized as legitimate by all international organizations. It is these demands that Israel refused to listen to, demonstrating once again that what the occupying power refuses, in the name of its alleged security, is not the satisfaction of Palestinian national rights (which are also enshrined in international law) but the establishment of the conditions for the satisfaction of their most elementary needs: travel, housing, healthcare, decent food, education. Hence the exasperation of the people of Gaza and the Palestinian resistance organizations, and the widespread feeling among the inhabitants of the enclave, despite the violence of the assault, as it was summed up by Raji Sourani of the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights (PCHR): "Better to die than to go back to the previous situation."

So there is no intransigence on the part of the Palestinians, but on the contrary a certain moderation, since no organization has asked for the satisfaction of all Palestinian national rights (the end of the civil and military occupation, self-determination and the right of return for refugees) in exchange for a cease-fire, but only basic rights and a little oxygen. The intransigence is to be found, once again, on the side of the State of Israel, which has demonstrated to anyone who wanted to forget it that it is pursuing, supposedly in the name of its "security", a meticulous enterprise of destruction of Palestinian society in order to prevent it from being able to demand its rights collectively. That was one of the unspoken objectives of the aggression against Gaza: to send this little coastal strip back to the Stone Age so that people's concerns are linked not to the struggle to end the occupation but to the struggle for survival and reconstruction.

It is therefore difficult, in such conditions, to talk about a real "victory" of the Palestinians, who have only obtained satisfaction on a part of their demands, which are however already moderate, with a partial easing of the blockade, an extension of the fishing zone and future discussions on the port and airport in Gaza. In short, no guarantee of a genuine lifting of the blockade and of a significant improvement of the living conditions of the Palestinians of Gaza. It is obviously not a question of being uncompromising and defending a strategy of "all or nothing", and we can only celebrate the fact that Gazans are no longer under bombardment. It must however be noted that the celebrations organized by Hamas following the signing of the truce and the fiery speeches of its leaders on "the immense victory of the Palestinian resistance" are very much at variance with reality, something which Gazans will not fail, and are already not failing, to observe.

### **Now what?**

Developments following the Israeli attack this summer confirm that the fundamental dynamics have not changed: the announcement in early September of the seizure of 400 hectares of land in the West Bank by the Israeli authorities indicates that they have in no way renounced the pursuit of the Zionist colonial enterprise, and even want to speed it up; the inability of Hamas and Mahmud Abbas to agree on the practical implementation of the "reconciliation" agreement confirms that it was very formal and precarious; the multiplication of (severely repressed) demonstrations in the West Bank and East Jerusalem suggests, in the wake of those that took place this summer, that the total stabilization of the system of occupation remains an elusive goal, despite the open collaboration of the Palestinian security forces in the West Bank.

Whereas the US administration claimed less than a year ago, to be "restarting the negotiated process" for the signing of a comprehensive and lasting settlement between Israel and the Palestinians, the offensive against Gaza, the deadliest in recent decades, confirms that it is futile to try to "negotiate" with Israel, and that all those who accept the rules of the "peace process" are acting, consciously or unconsciously, against the national interests of the

Palestinians, maintaining the illusion of a possible peace with the occupying power. The Palestinians do not need a pseudo-government of "national unity" and technical and specific agreements between the main Palestinian organizations, even though these agreements may be interpreted as positive by those who are fighting against the poison of division. The duties and powers of such a government are in fact those that the State of Israel is willing to accord it, and it is therefore futile to think that it could be a point of support for building a real relationship of forces against the colonial power.

What the recent sequence of events in Gaza and to a lesser extent in the West Bank has shown is that the Palestinians were never as strong and united as when they were fighting the occupation forces together. The only lasting "national unity" can be one built on a programme and a strategy of struggle and resistance, and not on the distribution of roles and positions within a pseudo-state apparatus, the Palestinian Authority, whose role is not to organize the Palestinian national struggle but to channel it and, if necessary, to destroy it. The PA is in fact a structure that was designed during the Oslo Accords, in order to neutralize Palestinian resistance and the Palestinian population, and to give the illusion of autonomy and of legitimate interlocutors in order to "negotiate". It has since found its own *raison d'être* and there are many people, first of all in Fatah, then in Hamas after it took control of Gaza, who have chosen to sacrifice the interests of the Palestinians on the altar of the moral and material benefits that managing a pseudo-state apparatus brings.

Those who believed, like some people in Hamas, that they could transform the PA "from inside" now know what the situation is: the problem was not so much that of unscrupulous individuals, prone to collaboration, as of a pseudo-autonomy which is only the continuation of the occupation by other means. A certain number of lucid voices are today making themselves heard in Palestine, saying: what is on the agenda today is to rebuild the resistance (creation of unitary activist structures at the basic level, of a unified command of the struggle, of trade unions independent of the PA, of agricultural cooperatives, village committees ...) and not the sterile struggle for control of a pseudo-state apparatus ready to sign an agreement ratifying cantonisation and doomed to be a mere subcontractor, doing the dirty work for the Israeli army, or to be liquidated if you dare to demand rights for Palestinians.

The events of this summer indicate that the crises of the "peace process" and of the Palestinian national movement will continue, as the Oslo parenthesis (and the illusion of "autonomy" leading to a lasting negotiated peace) closes. Future crises and confrontations are to be expected, whose form and outcome are uncertain, all the more so in that they will be largely dependent on developments in the regional revolutionary process. Although the first condition for the building of a new relationship of forces against Israel is indeed a break with the logic of Oslo and the development of structures and strategies for the reconstruction of Palestinian nationalism, it would however be unwise to forget that only a new regional relationship of forces, allowing the Palestinians to escape from their head-to-head confrontation with a State of Israel supported by all the Western countries can make it possible to imagine a brighter future.

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[1] Jean-François Legrain, "Le leurre de la "réconciliation" entre le Fatah et le Hamas", *Orient XXI*, July 2, 2014.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Gilbert Achcar, "Une offensive contre la réconciliation palestinienne", *Politix*, July 24, 2014.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Francesca Albanese, "Le silence assourdissant autour de la proposition du Hamas d'une trêve de 10 ans", Agence Médias Palestine, August 11, 2014.