



End the siege of Gaza

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It has become customary to begin articles about Palestine by reeling off casualty figures, as if it was possible to give an exact measure of the suffering or the sheer barbarity, to which Palestinians have been subjected, in numbers. And in a sense, this ritual has become meaningless, not just because it invariably tells the same story of a largely unarmed and defenceless population facing the armed might of the world's fourth strongest army, but because, by the time the story has been told, the Israel Defence Forces murder machine has already claimed another victim, and so renders the story out of date.

Even so, it is still useful to point to these figures, not as a measure of suffering or barbarity, but as an indication of the balance of forces, one that makes Israeli minister Matan Vilnai's reference to a "Holocaust" for the Palestinians sound less like a careless choice of words and more like a real threat

So, one could point out, as Seamus Milne did in *The Guardian*, that the ratio of Palestinian to Israeli deaths was four to one between 2000 and 2005 (at the height of the Al-Aqsa Intifada), and was 30 to one in 2006 (when the Palestinians were already largely defeated and were busy fighting amongst themselves). In the three months since the much-vaunted peace conference at Annapolis in the US, it has risen to more than 40 to one, with 323 Palestinians dead set against seven Israelis, of whom only two were civilians.

The crude home-made rockets fired by Palestinian militants from Gaza, the supposed justification for its siege and bombardment, have killed only 14 Israelis in the course of seven years. But in the West Bank, from which no rockets have been fired at all, there have been 480 Israeli attacks since November 2007, in which 26 Palestinians were killed.

Israel's apologists routinely base their support for Israel's murderous actions on its supposed right of self-defence in international law. But faced with such figures, one has to ask the question: just who is attacking, and who is retaliating? And this is without raising the question of the political source of the violence, the denial to the Palestinians of their right to return, or Israel's policy of building Jewish-only settlements on occupied Palestinian lands.

One need not use that dreaded word "disproportionate" to doubt that Palestinian violence, however misdirected and counter-productive it sometimes is, can hardly be the cause of a much larger onslaught whose ultimate political objective is to abolish the Palestinians' national existence as a people, whether through expulsion, forced emigration, or isolation into ghettos masquerading as a "state".

Nor is Palestinian violence any more indiscriminate than Israel's, as the victims of Israel's aggression in Lebanon can attest.

Similarly, it has become meaningless to count how long Gaza, the world's biggest open-air prison, has been "under siege" for, as if daily life in Gaza had been in some way "normal" before the current siege began.

Still, one should remember that this siege arose as a direct violation of the Palestinians' democratic right to choose their own leaders. Hamas won the January 2006 parliamentary elections with a large enough majority to claim power, either alone or with allies that included parts of the Palestinian left. Probably not wanting to win outright, nor expecting the scale of their victory, hoping to share the blame for the inevitable concessions they would have to make in any negotiations with Israel, they entered into a "unity government" with Fatah, the losers of the same election.

The response of the world's "democracies", the United States and the European Union, in particular, was to follow Israel's lead in withdrawing recognition and cutting off tax revenues, by imposing sanctions, withholding vital humanitarian aid and refusing to talk to the Palestinians until Hamas had "renounced terrorism" and recognised Israel's "right to exist" as if it was Israel's existence that was in any way seriously threatened. In parallel, they incited Fatah to provoke a Palestinian civil war to crush Hamas as a movement and eject it from office.

After the violence between the supporters of Fatah and Hamas was seemingly brought to an end by a Saudi-brokered accord, the US State Department revived its plans to strike at Hamas through the corrupt Palestinian security forces, trained by its Egyptian and Jordanian allies. Leaks to US magazine Vanity Fair show that Condoleezza Rice and Elliott Abrams (of Iran-Contra fame) cooked up a plot that involved money from the United Arab Emirates, guns from Egypt, and Gaza security chief Mohammed Dahlan, dubbed "Palestine's Pinochet" for his human rights abuses and unconcealed ambition.

Hamas' "take-over" of Gaza in June 2007 was therefore effectively a pre-emptive strike by a democratically elected government against an attempted coup, the preparations for which were already visible in advance to everybody except the most blinkered. The current siege is an intensification of what was first imposed after Hamas' election victory.

In the situation that faces the Palestinian people, and especially to the Gazans under siege, we have to say that a policy of pacifism is completely useless. But one need not be a pacifist to understand that the tactics adopted by Hamas have been counter-productive in the short term, while their strategy of guerrilla actions coupled with negotiations ultimately leads to the same blind alley of compromise and betrayal that Fatah has already traveled down.

Nevertheless, the actions that saw the breach in the wall at the Egyptian border near Rafah point the way forward. This "violation of Egypt's sovereignty", as the opponents of the Palestinian resistance in the Arab world put it, placed Egypt's government, and the other Arab states, in a position where they could no longer turn a blind eye.

Had the working class in Egypt had a leadership capable and willing to mobilise the masses to act, this could have been the beginning of a mass movement of practical solidarity to break the siege. And even in the absence of such a movement, this sort of action is able to inspire and promote the building of one, in the process shaking the corrupt capitalist Arab order that is as complicit in the oppression of the Palestinians as their direct enemies, US imperialism and the Zionist state.

Despite the Palestinians' weakness, therefore, we say that they do possess one weapon that, used consistently, can bring them closer towards victory. It consists of their ability, through mass action, to draw upon the solidarity of the popular masses and the oppressed, in the Arab states and world-wide. It is our responsibility in the West to build this movement of solidarity here.

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