

# Gaza and the Palestinian Struggle for Statehood

By Henry Siegman

## ■ Executive summary

The slaughter of Palestinian civilians and the Dresden-like reduction to rubble of large parts of Gaza by Israel's military forces in the name of its own citizens' security has exposed the hypocrisy at the heart of Israel's dealings with the Palestinians. Israel's claim to the right of self-defense in order to prevent its victims' emergence from under its occupation is the ultimate definition of chutzpa.

Without entering the debate over whether those rocket assaults were precipitated by Israel's own violations of truces and cease-fire accords it negotiated with Hamas, as documented by various analysts (including Amira Hass, Peter Beinart, Nathan Thrall, Sara Roy and others), Israel's claim to self-defense is based on a glaring falsehood.

An occupying power is under obligation in international law to do two things: to end the occupation, and until it does so, to protect the population under its occupation.

Israel is in blatant violation of both of these obligations. The security threats to its own citizens it invokes to justify its assaults which regularly result in the killing of far more Palestinian non-combatants than militants are triggered by its occupation. An occupied people told by its occupiers its subjugation is permanent, and that they will never be allowed to exercise the right to national self-determination and sovereign existence on territories recognized by the international community as their rightful patrimony, has every right to resort to resistance, including violent resistance, to achieve its freedom, for they are reacting to the violence that is keeping them illegally under occupation. It is a right exercised by the Jewish people when their own struggle for statehood was challenged.

This reality has certain clear policy implications for the cease-fire discussions now underway. Robert Serry, the UN special coordinator for the Middle East peace process, told the UN Security Council (August 18) that "The basic equation [in these negotiations] must consist of ending the blockade on Gaza, and addressing Israel's legitimate security concerns." These two "legitimate" goals are utterly irreconcilable, unless Israel is prepared to offer the Palestinians a guaranteed and enforceable road to a two-state solution, in conformity with the Road Map for Middle East Peace, to be implemented in parallel with Gaza's demilitarization. If they cannot, or will not agree to

that, there is no basis whatever for their demand for Gaza's demilitarization, for Israel has no right to expect Palestinians to acquiesce to the status quo as an occupied people as their permanent destiny.

The war crimes committed by Israel's armed forces during its War of Independence have been documented by Benny Morris in his book *Righteous Victims*, and more recently by Ari Shavit in his book *My Promised Land*. Both argue that because there would have been no Jewish state without these crimes (an unproven and doubtful claim), they must be accepted as a necessary evil. It is a dispensation that

neither author, nor Israelis in general, are prepared to extend to Palestinians still struggling for their people's independence and statehood.

Too many Israelis seem to believe they have a God-given right to occupy, suppress, disenfranchise and displace non-Jews—particularly Arabs—in Israel. That right seems to be implied in Prime Minister Netanyahu's insistence that Palestinians affirm the State of Israel as the historic homeland of the Jewish people.

It is a belief that, by extension, also leads some Israeli Jews to discredit and disenfranchise fellow Israeli Jews on Israel's political left and NGO humanitarian and civil rights activists who criticize Israel's behavior as deeply violative of democratic and humanitarian norms. That is why there have been repeated efforts in Israel's Knesset to outlaw these NGOs.

That belief may also account for the fact that adherents to a Jewish religious tradition that stresses the sanctity of human life and man's creation in the image of the divine react so callously to the destruction of innocents as Israelis have, 80 to 90 percent of whom approved Israel's incineration of so many of Gaza's non-combatant population. It seems not to have occurred to them that this sense of special entitlement that characterizes their behavior resonates an ideology that led to the Holocaust—even as they invoke the memory of the Holocaust in justification of measures they say are intended to prevent its reoccurrence.

Of all democracies in the world, Israel is probably the only one in which a member of its parliament, Ayelet Shaked, who publicly advocates genocide of the residents of Gaza, has not been expelled from her political party, Habayit Hayehudi, or from Israel's parliament, and whose deputy speaker of the Knesset, Moshe Feiglin, a member of Netanyahu's ruling Likud party, is an advocate of ethnic cleansing.

If there was any doubt (there never should have been) that Netanyahu and his government have no intention of ever permitting Palestinians to realize their right to statehood and self-determination, Netanyahu personally dispelled it on July 11 in a press conference in Hebrew, in which he declared he would never allow Palestinians the right to genuine sovereignty, the one element that defines statehood. As noted approvingly in *The Times of Israel* by its editor, David Horowitz, "Nobody will ever be able to claim in the future that [Netanyahu] didn't tell us what he really thinks. He made it explicitly clear that he could never, ever, countenance a fully sovereign Palestinian state in the West Bank."

Israel's pretense that it is sincerely committed to a two-state solution is repeatedly given the lie by the arbitrariness and contrariness of its dealings with Mahmoud Abbas. In the more recent months of their on-and-off relationship, Netanyahu treated Abbas as a serious partner for peace as

long as he was willing to engage with Israel in a peace process that served no purpose other than to provide Netanyahu's government with cover for the continued expansion of Israeli settlements, whose purpose, in turn, it is to *prevent* a two-state solution.

When that deception became too obvious even for so compliant a peace partner as Abbas and his colleagues, who have been providing Palestinian security forces to facilitate the continuation of Israel's occupation, they formed a unity government with Hamas. Abbas was immediately denounced by Netanyahu as no longer a partner for peace, accusing him of having chosen terror over peacemaking.

Now that Israel is faced with a rising wave of worldwide outrage—yet to reach its apogee—as the true scope of the killing and destruction wrought by Israeli forces in Gaza is being exposed, Netanyahu again finds it expedient to describe Abbas as a peace partner who can be relied upon by Israel to serve as gatekeeper for the prison in which the victims of Israel's latest "lawn mowing," both living and dead, are interred.

In the *New York Times* of August 13, Isabel Kershner reports that Netanyahu has dropped his condemnations of the new Palestinian unity government. Udi Dekel, a former lead Israeli negotiator with the Palestinians, said that most members of Israel's government now support the idea of working with the new Palestinian unity government. Yair Lapid, Israel's finance minister and leader of the government's second largest party Yesh Atid, and other centrist ministers, have been reported as putting forward plans "for an ambitious new order." Some believe that the negotiations for a truce could lead to peace talks that produce a two-state accord.

Of course, an opening for a two-state accord is the very last thing Netanyahu is seeking. He has devoted his entire political life to preventing such an accord, and probably believes it is a goal this latest war in Gaza may have achieved.

His vision for the future is not much different than that of Naftali Bennett, who heads the ultra-nationalist religious Habayit Hayehudi party. He is counting on the Palestinians and the international community's frustration and despair over a two-state outcome to enable Israel to proceed with unilateral measures that create disconnected Palestinian enclaves and the annexation to Israel of much of the West Bank. It is an arrangement, he believes, that would enable Israel to escape the stain of apartheid by granting nominal "full citizenship" to the few Palestinians remaining in the areas annexed to Israel.

But he is mistaken; it will not happen. Too many Palestinian mothers and fathers and brothers and sisters have seen their loved ones incinerated to allow Israel to escape the consequences of its ethnic cleansing and the resulting apartheid.

## ■ THE AUTHOR

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