Israel’s third war in Gaza and the prospects for Palestinian liberation

Marcus Halaby Fri, 07/11/2014 - 14:57

Israel’s onslaught on Gaza saw record numbers demand an end to the siege. Marcus Halaby asks how can we break the blockade and end the occupation of Palestine

As of the 26 August ceasefire, over 2,100 Palestinians have been killed since Israel began its wholesale bombing of Gaza on 8 July. Four-fifths of them are non-combatants, amongst them about 500 children.

At least five were killed in a direct attack on al-Aqsa Hospital on 21 July. The killing of 15 people in the Ashraf al-Qidra school on 3 August, in which 200 others were injured, shocked the world. But this is only the tip of the iceberg.

Israel and Hamas agreed to a 12-hour “humanitarian ceasefire” on 25 July, but Israel made it clear that it intended to resume its attack to give the IDF more time to carve out a buffer zone inside Gaza along its border with Israel. Even before this, on 10 July, the IDF warned the 100,000 inhabitants of Beit Lahia, Beit Hanoun and Abasan al-Saghira to evacuate their townships and flee to the west or south of the Gaza strip.

According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, at least 117,000 Gaza inhabitants (more than one in 20 of the total population) had been forced from their homes by 22 July, many of them taking shelter in UN schools like Ashraf al-Qidra.

Ninety schools and 18 health facilities were damaged, 2,655 housing units were rendered uninhabitable and another 3,175 housing units were damaged. Some 1.2 million people, around two-thirds of the population, have no or very limited access to water or sanitation, while 80 per cent of people only receive four hours of electricity per day.

Even after the ceasefire agreement it is plain that Israel not only has no intention of being bound by any agreement to a permanent cessation of its attacks, but also that it will put an end neither to the stranglehold that its blockade puts on the people of Gaza, nor the daily obstruction and humiliation that the network of checkpoints put on everyday life in the West Bank.

A ground invasion

This is the third time in six years that Israel has engaged in such a major and indiscriminate bombardment of the Gaza strip. In 2008-09, in the space of just 22 days, the IDF killed between 1,200 and 1,400 Palestinians. Its bombs demolished tens of thousands of homes and 15 of Gaza’s 27 hospitals. After this, a tight blockade did all it could to strangle life in the tiny territory. In November 2012, a further Israeli bombing onslaught saw 105 Palestinians killed, mainly civilians.

At various points in the conflict Israel also threatened also a full-scale ground invasion. Some 40,000 Israel
Defence Forces (IDF) personnel were called up and 20,000 deployed into the Gaza border region. IDF spokespersons and government figures announced that their objective this time would be to wipe out Hamas for good.

This stated objective is simply unachievable without enormous loss of life, a genocidal act that would once again confirm the ineradicably racist character of the Zionist settler state.

To aid the Israelis, Egypt’s fraudulently ‘elected’ military dictator Abdel Fattah el-Sisi has kept the Rafah border crossing firmly closed, and similarly colluded with Israel by closing the tunnels through which supplies and weapons reach Gaza’s defenders. Trying his best to wipe out the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Sisi would be quite happy to see the Israelis liquidate Hamas so long as he can deny responsibility and repress any mass expressions of solidarity with the Palestinians at home.

Indifferent world leaders and their furious people

This massive collective punishment would if carried out by any other state attract the most violent (if also hypocritical) condemnation. But because Israel is protected by the United States and by most of its European allies, it would be futile even to summon the UN Security Council into session. The USA would veto even the slightest criticism of Israel, let alone any mandate for sanctions against it.

Nevertheless the great majority of ordinary people around the world are horrified at what is happening in Gaza, and furious with smug hypocrites, like John Kerry, Barack Obama and David Cameron, who while claiming to represent world opinion continue to excuse and justify Israel’s crimes and its long term struggle to destroy the Palestinian people and drive them out of their historic homeland.

Even when ‘world leaders’ condemn Israel’s actions, the third such bombardment in six years, or indeed the blockade of Gaza, the Apartheid Wall, the myriad checkpoints or the continued expansion of settlements in the occupied West Bank, they still do little or nothing to back their words up with deeds.

The demonstrations that took place in late July and early August in London, Paris, Berlin, Vienna, Istanbul, Sydney, Washington DC and may other cities indicate the enormous support that the Palestinian cause has across the world. And they have mobilised not just out of sympathy for other people’s suffering, but also out of admiration for their resistance and in order to support their struggle.

The working class and anti-imperialist movement worldwide must unite, as it did in 2009, to condemn this savagery, to demand its immediate and permanent cessation and in particular, to demand that our rulers break their complicity with Israel, the key factor that enables the Zionist state to repeat its atrocities time and again with total impunity.

The propaganda war

As before, the Western media, even those parts of it that cannot totally ignore the horrors being visited on Palestinian civilians, repeat the Israeli and American narrative of self-justification.

Hamas is a ‘terrorist organisation’, pledged to the destruction of Israel, which rules over Gaza and fires rockets from it into Israel.

‘Hiding behind civilians’, it uses the population as a ‘human shield’, forcing Israel’s army, the most moral and humane in the world, to kill unarmed and defenceless civilians. However, since the IDF thoughtfully sends these civilians text messages telling them to evacuate their homes just before the bombs hit, their deaths while regrettable are nonetheless Hamas’s responsibility, or maybe their own.
None of these well-rehearsed and pre-packaged justifications for Israel’s actions stand up to any scrutiny, but the charge of hiding behind civilians? is the flimsiest and most bizarre of all.

In the first instance, Gaza, with a total area of just 365 square kilometres, about the size of the Isle of Wight, within which 1.8 million people are crammed, is one of the most densely inhabited places on earth; there is almost nowhere in Gaza that civilians are not present.

A little more effective in confusing public opinion around the world is the accusation that Hamas is an avatar of Islamic terrorism?. But the fact is that Hamas, as a movement with tens of thousands of cadres, possessing a bureaucracy responsible for disbursing aid and services to almost 2 million people, is quite as inextricable from the host population from which it is recruited and from which it draws its support as any mass political party in the West ? or, for that matter, in Israel. Indeed, its roots are far deeper, since it is seen as an expression of the legitimate resistance to Israeli persecution.

Even if this charge, of hiding behind civilians?, were restricted to Hamas’s armed formations, it is plain nonsense when set against the pervasive and visible presence of Israel’s own conscript army in day-to-day Israeli life.

The Palestinians, so this narrative concludes, are to have no choice but to accept a unilateral ceasefire on Israel’s terms ? one that they will not be allowed to play any direct role in negotiating, and any inevitable breaches of which will be the pretext for further bombardment and a ground invasion.

So brazen and cynical are these excuses that they refute themselves to millions of people worldwide. But these millions do not provide the billions of dollars in aid and trade that sustain the racist settler state. A handful of key Western imperialist states do, propping up Israel with loan guarantees and military assistance and supplying it with their high-tech weaponry.

Israel’s pretext

Israel sought a pretext for their latest offensive on Gaza in the killing in mid-June of three teenage boys from the Gush Etzion settlement bloc in the southern West Bank by their Palestinian kidnappers.

An almost three week long search, during which Israel arrested and mistreated over 600 Palestinians, including many former prisoners that had been released following a previous ceasefire agreement, led to the discovery of the bodies of the three settler youths on 30 June.

The evidence however is that the Israeli authorities already knew of their deaths shortly after their disappearance on 12 June and tried to suppress this knowledge while the search was ongoing, using it as cover for making politically motivated arrests without any connection to their kidnapping.

On 1 July, as their funerals were taking place, Israel struck at 34 locations in the Gaza strip, breaching a ceasefire that had held since the last major Israeli operation in 2012. Within the first nine days of this assault, the Israeli air force had by its own admission dropped 400 tonnes of explosives, according to a statement by Britain’s Unite trade union.

The day after that, on 2 July, the world awoke to the news of the revenge kidnapping and murder in East Jerusalem of 16-year-old Palestinian boy Mohammed Abu Khdeir, who had been beaten and then killed by being set on fire.

A West Bank settler had struck 9-year-old Sanabel Al-Tous with his car the previous day, leaving her lying on the ground with multiple fractures. In Haifa an Israeli driver ran over 55-year-old Anwar Satel from Jaffa, and 44-year-old Zahi Abu Hamed from Qalqilya in the West Bank on 6 July. Numerous other assaults and
Kidnapping attempts were also reported across the country. Racist vigilante activity of this sort is increasingly common, with 200 attacks by settlers on Palestinians reported every year. On this occasion it led to angry protests by West Bank youth, which turned into mass demonstrations by early July and even saw street fighting in Israel proper, as the youth of Israel’s own Palestinian minority displayed their support for their co-nationals across the Green Line. This lasted for several days, leaving the Israeli media to express fears of a Third Intifada.

All attempts to defuse the situation, including by Hamas, came to nothing because of Israeli rather than Palestinian intransigence. The Israeli government intervened brutally against the demonstrations, tightening its occupation of the West Bank.

Limited rocket attacks from Gaza, none of which led to any Israeli deaths, provided the pretext for threatening a ground invasion. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu instructed the army to “take off the kid gloves”. Not to be outdone, his far right Minister of Foreign Affairs Avigdor Lieberman called for an invasion.

The devastating bombing campaign, when it began, was as always ostensibly directed against Hamas terrorism, whose very existence supposedly renders impossible any peaceful solution.

Real roots of Israel’s offensive

It would be a mistake, however, to regard what is happening now as being the tragic result of some spontaneous “cycle of violence”, or even just of an emotive Israeli overreaction to the deaths of three young settlers. Quite aside from equating the irresponsible actions of whichever Palestinian faction had kidnapped and killed the three settler youths with the spontaneous and popular racial supremacist violence of a settler society, the fact remains that the Netanyahu government’s actions have a political motive and a political context.

Part of this context is that Hamas, acting from a position of weakness, had been moving towards an agreement with Mahmoud Abbas’s collaborationist Palestinian Authority (PA), aimed at ending Hamas’s conflict with the PA’s leading party, Abbas’s Fatah movement. This conflict had begun with Hamas’s victory in the January 2006 PA parliamentary elections, and culminated in the division of the PA-ruled regions between Fatah and Hamas in June 2007, when the Gaza-based Hamas PA prime minister Ismail Haniyeh successfully defeated an attempted coup by forces loyal to the Ramallah-based Fatah PA president Mahmoud Abbas.

The proposed unity agreement, signed by Haniyeh in Gaza on 23 April this year, called for a Palestinian unity government within five weeks, to be followed by presidential and parliamentary elections within six months. Mustafa Barghouti of the Ramallah-based Palestinian National Initiative played a major role in negotiating this agreement, and it is probably not accidental that the Israeli army ransacked his offices and stole computers from them on the fourth day of their search for the three missing settler youths.

The prospect of a formal reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas caused serious panic in Israel for obvious reasons. The division of the Palestinian territories between Fatah and Hamas has been Israel’s key justification to its Western allies for maintaining the military occupation and illegal settlement expansion in the West Bank, while effectively turning Gaza into an open-air concentration camp.

Israel’s ruling class had also been dismayed by the 2011 revolution in Egypt and by the election in 2012 of President Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood, who relaxed the closure of Gaza’s border with Egypt. Morsi’s overthrow in a military coup in July 2013 might have deprived Hamas of a potential point of...
support, but for Israel this was not enough; Hamas’s isolation had to be maintained.

The Palestinians’ right to choose their own leaders

The Hamas-Fatah conflict, after all, had its roots in Israel’s determination to ensure that Hamas could not and would not become a legitimate and recognised interlocutor for any future peace negotiations, no matter how cosmetic and fruitless the negotiations themselves were.

As the major Palestinian party that had stood openly for armed resistance to Israel during the Second Intifada of 2000 to 2005, and that had pioneered the use of “suicide bombings” against Israeli military and civilian targets, Hamas could not be rewarded with a place at the negotiating table, no matter how strong its popular support; this, in Israeli doublespeak, would be “rewarding terrorism”. Israel always reserves to itself the right to decide who shall represent the Palestinians and the USA always supports its choice.

The Hamas-led PA government that took office in March 2006 was therefore deprived of international recognition from all the major Western states and their Arab allies, subjected to sanctions including the stripping of the foreign aid contributions that constituted most of its budget, and was forced to watch helplessly as Israeli forces arrested a third of its parliament. Since that time, economic and diplomatic sanctions have been followed by a murderous siege that in the infamous words of Ariel Sharon’s legal adviser Dov Weissglass would “put the Palestinians on a diet”.

Forced into a “unity government” with Fatah in March 2007 by Saudi mediation as a prelude to its botched Western and Israeli-planned overthrow in June 2007, Hamas’s political and diplomatic isolation was intended to send a message to the Palestinians and to the Arab world: that only a Palestinian leadership that had accepted that its role was to repress the legitimate national aspirations of its own people would be considered a “partner for peace”; and that the only “peace” that such a leadership could be a party to would be one that looked much like a permanent continuation of the present day situation, of ongoing occupation and cumulative land theft.

In much this vein, Dov Weissglass in August 2004 described Sharon’s strategy of military disengagement from Gaza as the “formaldehyde that’s necessary so that there will not be a political process with the Palestinians”, while current prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu infamously and on repeated occasions stated that the Palestinians might just as well refer to any state that might be formed out of the scraps of land left to them in the West Bank as “fried chicken”.

What Israel wants is to continue its occupation and ongoing theft of Palestinian land. Meanwhile, the USA and the European Union (amiably supported by Putin’s Russia) every few years provide cover for this with the charade of another peace initiative.

Two-state solution

For more than two decades successive Israeli governments have torpedoed each and every peace proposal that might have forced them to suspend, if not quite halt the remorseless expansion of Jewish settlements into the ever-shrinking territory available for a separate Palestinian state. Zionism’s aim is quite simply to make impossible any sort of independent Palestinian entity, leaving the Palestinians nothing except an archipelago of tiny reservations.

The more right wing forces, like Avigdor Lieberman’s Yisrael Beiteinu (“Israel Our Home”) party, would ultimately like to clear the West Bank and Gaza of Palestinians altogether.

Harassed and humiliated on a daily basis by viciously aggressive settlers and by the occupying army that
protects them, the inhabitants of the indigenous Palestinian communities resort to desperate and occasionally misguided acts of resistance or revenge, invariably meeting a disproportionately violent response from Israel.

This recurrent pattern and the dynamic behind it show clearly that the ?two-state solution? is a utopia.

Peddled for the last three decades by a fraudulent international diplomatic consensus, led by the USA and by its European allies and supported by most of the official labour movement in the West, it has been accepted not only by the corrupt bureaucrats of Fatah, but even, in substance, by Hamas, who have indicated repeatedly that they would accept an indefinite truce with Israel in return for its full withdrawal to the 1967 Green Line.

Even so, every attempt to achieve this outcome, whether through diplomacy or through armed struggle, has only ever led to an even worse situation for the Palestinians. Even if it could be established, it would only create two economically unviable and disarmed enclaves, still substantially under Israeli control. Israel, however, to avoid a ?two-state solution?, always comes up with new conditions that they know the Palestinians cannot accept, the latest being not just the usual mantra of the Palestinians? recognition of Israel?s ?right to exist?, but also of Israel?s right to maintain its character ?as a Jewish state?.

The ?Jewish state? and Palestinian national rights

So in March 2014, Netanyahu addressed Mahmoud Abbas with the demand that the Palestinians must ?abandon the fantasy of flooding Israel with refugees? and that they ?must be prepared to recognise a Jewish state?. Thus, the Palestinians are offered ?peace? on the basis of abandoning the right of return for the millions of Palestinian refugees driven off their land by repeated waves of Zionist settlement. And what would recognition of a ?Jewish state? ? a state for all the world?s Jews, not just for those who live there ? mean for Israel?s non-Jewish citizens? Israel?s Palestinian minority, second-class citizens in their own country, can answer that.

Israel will never allow a separate Palestinian state enjoying any degree of genuine sovereignty, or political or economic viability to be formed in any part of the historic homeland of the Palestinian people. Israel?s own character as a state built on a project of continuing and as yet uncompleted colonisation, legitimised by a Zionist ideology that pervades its colonist-descended Jewish majority population, effectively excludes this outcome.

Any sovereign and contiguous Palestinian state with its own armed forces would close off to future Jewish settlement lands that today provide Israel with a useful safety valve for managing its own internal class, ethnic and religious contradictions. It would also undermine the Zionist ideology that is used to justify not only the continuing theft of land in the 1967 Occupied Territories, but the very foundation of the state itself, with its mass expulsion and dispossession of between 750,000 and 900,000 Palestinians between 1947 and 1950.

Similarly, any genuine Palestinian state would sooner or later be compelled to give voice to the popular Palestinian demand for the right of return of these refugees and their descendants, today numbering some 5 million in the Occupied Territories and across the Arab world. It would also be compelled to support the demands for equal civil and political rights for Israel?s 1.7 million Palestinian Arab citizens, who constitute just under one fifth of Israel?s population within its pre-1967 territory.

In short, Palestinian national self-determination, within however small a territory, would inevitably become, in Zionism?s terminology, an ?existential threat? to Israel as currently constituted, undermining it
ideologically, politically and demographically. That is why Israel cannot ever concede it.

Far from being a realistic short-term goal that might provide the Palestinians with a breathing space, "two states" is simply a mirage towards which they are being drawn, while they are in reality moving towards their own national destruction.

The national liberation of the Palestinian people will therefore most likely not proceed through their separation into a territory of their own? a feat in any case rendered more and more impossible by Israel?s ever-expanding network of settlements on Palestinian land, serviced by an infrastructure designed to satisfy their needs while disrupting Palestinian life? but through the revolutionary democratisation of the present day reality of only one state between the Jordan and the Mediterranean.

Nevertheless, we support every attempt of the Palestinian people to struggle against the 1967 occupation of Gaza, East Jerusalem and the West Bank and against its consequences. In the immediate present, this includes a struggle to lift the siege of Gaza and to end the denial, implicit in the refusal to recognise Hamas, of the Palestinians? right to choose their own leaders and representatives.

**Armed struggle and mass revolt**

The mass revolt of the Palestinians at the beginning of July showed the existing potential for the new Intifada, or mass uprising that the Israelis fear far more than any Hamas rockets. In East Jerusalem there have been demonstrations almost every day since the settler vigilante murder of Mohammed Abu Khdeir.

Culminating in a 10,000 strong march on 25 July from the outskirts of Ramallah in the West Bank to the Qalandia checkpoint on the road to Jerusalem, which Palestinian leaders have described as an "uprising of freedom and independence?, these have been the largest demonstrations in the West Bank for over a decade.

Notwithstanding the meaningless official optimism of Fatah leaders who have no intention of leading such an uprising however much they celebrate its prospects in public, this movement could indeed develop in such a direction, given the right leadership and strategy. But to succeed it needs to be joined by people across the world exerting the maximum pressure on their own rulers.

By allowing the masses in the West Bank and Palestinians in Israel to throw their numbers into the scale alongside the besieged people of Gaza, it would help to expose the Zionist state for what it is: not "the only democracy in the Middle East?", not "a land without a people for a people without a land?", but an inherently undemocratic settler colony, meant to deprive an already existing people of their present and only homeland.

This is neither to denigrate nor to understate the importance of Gaza's military defence against Israeli attack, whether conducted by Hamas or by any other Palestinian organisation. That military struggle remains entirely legitimate, and must be supported by socialists and anti-imperialists worldwide.

Unfortunately, however, Iranian rockets alone will not force the Zionist state to its knees.

A political mass movement of Palestinian workers, farmers and youth in the 1967 Occupied Territories and in Israel itself, supported by a global movement of solidarity, could help to bring about domestic and international conditions that would force Israel to abandon its siege and periodic bombardment of Gaza, thereby throwing its whole policy towards the Palestinians into crisis.

Given sufficient strength, such a movement should set itself the task of breaking the deadly unity between Israel's ruling class and its privileged Jewish-Israeli working class, emboldening that small but brave minority within Jewish-Israeli society who are ashamed and revolted by the virulent racism, so reminiscent
of antisemitism, only in this instance directed against the Palestinians.

Global solidarity

Israel’s actions have inflamed the hatred of millions of people worldwide, who increasingly recognise it as a racist state, waging a war of terror for the destruction of the Palestinian people.

This coincides with the desperate need of the Palestinian resistance for international solidarity, both in the Western states that support Israel’s atrocities and from the masses in the Arab countries – above all, in Egypt.

Socialists there must demand an end to Sisi’s shameful collaboration with the Zionist state and argue for unconditional military and logistical support for the Palestinian resistance, beginning with the reopening of the border crossings.

This duty of solidarity also applies to the left and the workers’ movement in the USA and Europe. Here, too, socialists must demand an end to all the support that Israel receives from their own governments, and in particular their arms sales and military cooperation.

Trade unions, student and youth organisations, left wing, labour and socialist parties, and indeed all progressive and democratic forces should condemn Israel’s attack and express their unequivocal support for the Palestinian resistance to it. We should reject the argument, repeated time and again in our own mass media, that opposition to the state of Israel and its ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians is anti-Semitic. Far from it, a movement of global solidarity would also be an important point of support for, and solidarity with the courageous anti-Zionist minority in Israel itself.

We need to build on the massive outpouring of people onto the streets that has already taken place to create a movement that forces governments and businesses worldwide to stop all arms supplies, all oil and gas supplies, in fact all trade of logistical value to Israel’s war effort. We need to combat the support that Israel receives in the media, both state-owned and that of the billionaire press barons, demanding an uncensored voice for the Palestinians and the representatives of the mass movement in their support. We need to expose and confront the Israel lobby in academia.

As a starting point, we should support demands for:

- The immediate, unconditional and total withdrawal of the IDF from Gaza
- The ending of the siege of Gaza by land, sea and air and the right of its people to travel to the West Bank, Israel, and abroad
- The closure of the entire network of checkpoints choking civilian life in the West Bank, and the demolition of the infamous Apartheid Wall
- The withdrawal of all the illegal settlements and their armed settlers from Palestinian land in East Jerusalem and the West Bank
- The payment of full reparations to all those in Gaza whose houses have been destroyed or damaged and the restoration of all schools, hospitals and infrastructure
- The immediate and unconditional release of all political prisoners and detainees
- The recognition of the right of return for all those expelled from their homes since the foundation of the Zionist state in 1948.
But the idea that Palestine can ever be free as long as the Zionist state continues to exist is itself an illusion. The current inherently racist state must be utterly destroyed and replaced with a united and socialist Palestine; a land for Arabic and Hebrew speakers, for Muslims, Jews, Christians, Druze, Bedouins, Circassians, etc. to live and work in. It must be a secular, bi-national and multi-ethnic state with no privileges for, or discrimination against any part of its population.

The overthrow of capitalism would remove the barrier that the institution of private property in the means of production raises against workers of all national and linguistic backgrounds working together for the common good, so that disputes over who owns the land or the factories and offices can be resolved collectively.

Such a solution must be part of a liberation of the entire Middle East from outside imperialist powers and from the corrupt monarchies and military dictatorships that infest it today. And the only social force that can lead this struggle is the working class of the region; the goal that it needs to aim for being the creation of workers' states, and their unification in a Socialist Federation of the Middle East.

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