

Major powers complicit in Israeli war crimes

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Israel's actions in Gaza and on the West Bank constitute war crimes.

Few any longer believe that Tel Aviv is seriously concerned with securing the release of Corporal Gilad Shalit. Rather, Israel is, as Prime Minister Ehud Olmert declared yesterday, waging "a long war" aimed at destroying whatever remains of the political infrastructure of the Palestinian Authority so as to bring about regime change.

Launching such a war of aggression is a "crime against peace," according to the Nuremberg Principles drawn up to determine what constitutes a war crime during the trials of Nazi party members following World War II, and incorporated into the Charter of the United Nations. It is a crime made worse by the grotesquely unequal character of the conflict now being waged, with Israel enjoying an overwhelming military superiority.

Israel has targeted leading Palestinian parliamentarians for arrest and detention. It has bombed the offices of Prime Minister Ismail Haniya and threatened to assassinate Hamas political leader Khaled Meshaal and others who are exiled in Damascus.

Referring to the arrest of fully one third of the Palestinian cabinet and dozens of Hamas representatives, Israel's defence minister, Labour leader Amir Peretz, declared, "The masquerade ball is over.... The suits and ties will not serve as cover to the involvement and support of kidnappings and terror."

Israeli's policy of regime change does not end in Palestine. Syria is also a target. In a deliberately provocative action, four Israeli fighter jets buzzed the summer palace of President Bashar al-Assad, while he was in residence. Olmert has said the key to solving the crisis lies in Syria, accusing Damascus of ordering recent attacks on Israel. Deputy Prime Minister Shimon Peres has insisted that Assad must expel what he claims is a "terrorist apparatus" working from Syria.

Tel Aviv intends to plunge the Palestinians into conditions of abject misery in order to extinguish any will to resist its dictates. To this end the incursion into Gaza has been the occasion for the imposition of collective punishments—a practice once again associated with the Nazi SS and Wehrmacht, and explicitly labeled a war crime and banned under the Geneva Conventions.

The first action taken by Israel in its present offensive was to destroy Gaza's only power plant, depriving almost 50 percent of Gaza's residents of electricity at a time when temperatures are hitting the mid-30s. Since then it has continued to shell civilian infrastructure, including bridges, roads, a university and a charity. Every night, jets fly over Gaza City and other major population centers, creating sonic booms and shattering windows. Olmert declared, "I take personal responsibility for what is happening in Gaza. I want nobody to sleep at night in Gaza."

These punitive measures are directed against a people who have already suffered terribly as a result of months of economic and military blockade. The Gaza Strip is home to one and a half million people, making it one of the most densely populated areas on earth. Most are refugees who still live in eight UN-administered camps, which lack even the most basic infrastructure. For five months Israel, with the backing of the major powers, has closed Gaza's borders, and denied it tax revenues. As a result, hundreds of thousands had been reduced to near starvation even before the present hostilities commenced.

Israel's political and military agenda is so naked that several commentators have been forced to disagree with the usual media claims that the attack on Gaza is aimed at freeing the captured soldier.

The *Financial Times* leader July 1 stated, "The new Israeli government of Ehud Olmert says its sole purpose is to

secure the release of Corporal Gilad Shalit, seized last Sunday in a raid by Palestinian militants on an Israeli army post. But the disproportion between means and ends suggests this may be a pretext.... [Olmert] was elected on a pledge to set unilaterally new borders for an expanded Israeli state, by annexing large swaths of the Occupied Territory on which Palestinians had hoped to build their independent state. Getting away with this land-grab depends on the credibility of the Israeli government's claim that it has no Palestinian interlocutor and must therefore act to safeguard its security."

Will Hutton in the *Observer* wrote, "The dark interpretation of Israel's reaction in Gaza is that it does not want a politically viable negotiating partner in Palestine. It suits Israel to characterise Hamas as terrorist fundamentalists who are beyond the pale. Thus it can proceed with its unilaterally imposed settlement, wall and land grab, in turn fanning the flames of Palestinian extremism."

Shimon Schiffer wrote in *Yediot Aharonot*, "What we have here is not an attempt to rescue Corporal Shalit and bring him safe to his family and not an attempt to stop the firing of the Qassam rockets but a move aimed at destroying the Hamas government ..."

Minutes from last week's negotiations between Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and faction leaders from the Hamas, Islamic Jihad and the Popular and Democratic Fronts, published in *Ha'aretz*, also confirm that the assault on Gaza was aimed at preventing an agreement by the Islamic groups to recognise Israel.

Abbas described the "road map" drawn up by the United States, Europe, Russia and the United Nations as "a life saver". No one could pressurise the Israelis "except the Americans" and no other course was possible, he insisted, adding that Palestinian Authority institutions in Gaza "are 75 percent destroyed, while in the West Bank they are 100 percent destroyed."

That is the perspective signed up to by Hamas and Islamic Jihad on the day Israel invaded Gaza. It was the desperate hope of a regime teetering on the brink of collapse that currying favour with Bush would convince the US to rein in its regional client. But Tel Aviv did not want a capitulation on the part of Hamas that would deprive it of the excuse for its campaign against the Palestinian Authority. It mounted a rocket bombardment of Gaza in order to provoke an act of defiance that would provide a pretext for a full-scale invasion—and got its wish with the border raid by Palestinian commandos and the capture of Corporal Shalit.

These facts are well known within ruling circles internationally. Moreover, Israel's attacks are waged against a government that was popularly elected in January in a process insisted on by the Quartet of the US, the European Union, Russia and the United Nations. Yet despite this, and after a week-long offensive that threatens to end in bloodshed, no Western government has issued anything but the most perfunctory appeals for restraint by Israel.

In the first instance this is because the offensive in Gaza has Washington's full backing.

At an emergency meeting of the UN Security Council on June 30, the US blocked the passing of a resolution criticising Israel. US ambassador to the UN John Bolton said the Security Council should "avoid taking any steps that would unexpectedly exacerbate tensions in the region" and insisted Shalit's release was the "best way to resolve the immediate crisis". He utilised the meeting as an opportunity to step up Washington's attacks on Syria and Iran, demanding that both "end their role as state sponsors of terror and unequivocally condemn the actions of Hamas, including this kidnapping".

The Bush administration initially toyed with the possibility of a negotiated settlement, accepting a Palestinian state within parts of the Occupied Territories in order to placate its Arab allies and make it politically easier for them to continue backing the occupation of Iraq in the face of domestic opposition. However, last spring, with the US intent on strengthening its grip on the Middle East, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon was able to secure Bush's backing for his plan to unilaterally draw up Israel's borders. Sharon's successor, Olmert, knows that he has carte blanche in Gaza and the West Bank and that the US also welcomes the ratcheting up of tensions with Damascus.

The European powers are concerned that Israel's actions threaten to destabilise the Middle East. But they are not prepared to contemplate a direct confrontation with Washington in order to prevent this.

More fundamentally, the virtual silence of the world's major powers testifies to the degree to which basic standards of international law have been universally jettisoned since the US-led war against Iraq.

There is nothing that Israel is doing in Gaza that was not carried out by the US and its major ally Britain in Iraq.

There too, war was declared on the basis of a manufactured pretext. And Washington had even fewer qualms about openly professing regime change as a war aim in violation of international law. As evidenced by the murderous US assault on Fallujah, the collective punishment subsequently inflicted on the Iraqi people for daring to resist occupation has been just as brutal and obscene as that now being imposed on the Palestinians.

In this, the Bush administration acts as a trail blazer whose path is followed by all the imperialist powers.

The European Union attempted to maintain a certain distance from the US over Iraq and called for continued respect for international law and multilateral institutions. But aside from direct military participation, the European powers did everything possible to facilitate the attack on Baghdad and subsequently backed the US occupation.

Just months after the war, the UN Security Council sanctioned the invasion and gave the occupying forces unlimited control of the country's oil wealth. In effect, the near unanimous vote not only justified the colonial subjugation of Iraq, but also future wars of aggression.

Prior to Iraq, the European powers' major criticism of the US focused on its doctrine of "preventive" or "pre-emptive war". But the subsequent draft European constitution—that fell only as a result of massive "No" votes in referenda in France and the Netherlands—advocated preventive war as the military doctrine of the European Union.

This descent into illegality includes the acquiescence of the European powers in the face of the abuses at Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib and collusion with CIA renditions. It also shapes Europe's own political agenda. All the measures attacking democratic rights pioneered by the US in the so-called "war against terror" have been adopted by the major powers—arbitrary detention, state surveillance and the criminalisation of political dissent.

The tragedy that has befallen the Palestinians is perhaps the most telling example of the collusion between the US and the governments of Europe.

America finances the Israeli war machine, while Europe agrees to fund the Palestinian Authority—providing that it abandons any resistance to occupation. This is the essence of the "road map" agreed by the Quartet. When Tel Aviv utilised Hamas's election to the leadership of the PA to call for an economic blockade, Brussels as well as Washington supported it.

Israel's offensive in Gaza cannot be opposed by the appeals to the "international community" now being made by the PA. Powers which themselves are seeking to legitimise a return to wars of colonial conquest and the installation of puppet regimes cannot protest too loudly when similar crimes are perpetrated by Israel. Rather, it necessitates the political mobilisation of workers, young people and intellectuals on a socialist and internationalist programme that places opposition to Zionism within a broader perspective for the liberation of the Middle East from imperialist domination.