



OPINION/EDITORIAL



Palestine 2007: Genocide in Gaza, Ethnic Cleansing in the West Bank

Ilan Pappé, *The Electronic Intifada*, 11 January 2007

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A general view of Har Homa settlement, built on the land of West Bank city of Bethlehem, and considered by Israel to be part of 'Greater Jerusalem', 29 November 2006. ([MaanImages/Magnus Johansson](#))

On this stage, not so long ago, I claimed that Israel is conducting genocidal policies in the Gaza Strip. I hesitated a lot before using this very charged term and yet decided to adopt it. Indeed, the responses I received, including from some leading human rights activists, indicated a certain unease over the usage of such a term. I was inclined to rethink the term for a while, but came back to employing it today with even stronger conviction: it is the only appropriate way to describe what the Israeli army is doing in the Gaza Strip.

On 28 December 2006, the Israeli human rights organization B'Tselem published its annual report about the Israeli atrocities in the occupied territories. Israeli forces killed this last year six hundred and sixty citizens. The number of Palestinians killed by Israel last year tripled in comparison to the previous year (around two hundred). According to B'Tselem, the Israelis killed one hundred and forty one children in the last year. Most of the dead are from the Gaza Strip, where the Israeli forces demolished almost 300 houses and slew entire families. This means that since 2000, Israeli forces killed almost four thousand Palestinians, half of them children; more than twenty thousand were wounded.

B'Tselem is a conservative organization, and the numbers may be higher. But the point is not just about the escalating intentional killing, it is about the trend and the strategy. As 2007 commences, Israeli policymakers are facing two very different realities in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. In the former, they are closer than ever to finishing the construction of their eastern border. Their internal ideological debate is over and their master plan for annexing half of the West Bank is being implemented at an ever-growing speed. The last phase was delayed due to the promises made by Israel, under the Road Map, not to build

new settlements. Israel found two ways of circumventing this alleged prohibition. First, it defined a third of the West Bank as Greater Jerusalem, which allowed it to build within this new annexed area towns and community centers. Secondly, it expanded old settlements to such proportions so that there was no need to build new ones. This trend was given an additional push in 2006 (hundreds of caravans were installed to mark the border of the expansions, the planning schemes for the new towns and neighborhoods were finalized and the apartheid bypass roads and highway system completed). In all, the settlements, the army bases, the roads and the wall will allow Israel to annex almost half of the West Bank by 2010. Within these territories there will be a considerable number of Palestinians, against whom the Israeli authorities will continue to implement slow and creeping transfer policies -- too boring as a subject for the western media to bother with and too elusive for human rights organizations to make a general point about them. There is no rush; as far as the Israelis are concerned, they have the upper hand there: the daily abusive and dehumanizing mixed mechanisms of army and bureaucracy is as effective as ever in contributing its own share to the dispossession process.

The strategic thinking of Ariel Sharon that this policy is far better than the one offered by the blunt 'transferists' or ethnic cleansers, such as Avigdor Liberman's advocacy, is accepted by everyone in the government, from Labor to Kadima. The *petit* crimes of state terrorism are also effective as they enable liberal Zionists around the world to softly condemn Israel and yet categorize any genuine criticism on Israel's criminal policies as anti-Semitism.

On the other hand, there is no clear Israeli strategy as yet for the Gaza Strip; but there is a daily experiment with one. Gaza, in the eyes of the Israelis, is a very different geo-political entity from that of the West Bank. Hamas controls Gaza, while Abu Mazen seems to run the fragmented West Bank with Israeli and American blessing. There is no chunk of land in Gaza that Israel covets and there is no hinterland, like Jordan, to which the Palestinians of Gaza can be expelled. Ethnic cleansing is ineffective here.

The earlier strategy in Gaza was ghettoizing the Palestinians there, but this is not working. The ghettoized community continues to express its will for life by firing primitive missiles into Israel. Ghettoizing or quarantining unwanted communities, even if they were regarded as sub-human or dangerous, never worked in history as a solution. The Jews know it best from their own history. The next stages against such communities in the past were even more horrific and barbaric. It is difficult to tell what the future holds for the Gaza population, ghettoized, quarantined, unwanted and demonized. Will it be a repeat of the ominous historical examples or is a better fate still possible?

Creating the prison and throwing the key to the sea, as UN Special Reporter John Dugard has put it, was an option the Palestinians in Gaza reacted against with force as soon as September 2005. They were determined to show at the very least that they were still part of the West Bank and Palestine. In that month, they launched the first significant, in number and not quality, barrage of missiles into the Western Negev. The shelling was a response to an Israeli campaign of mass arrests of Hamas and Islamic Jihad activists in the Tul Karem area. The Israelis responded with operation 'First Rain'. It is worth dwelling for a moment on the nature of that operation. It was inspired by the punitive measures inflicted first by colonialist powers, and then by dictatorships, against rebellious imprisoned or banished communities. A frightening show of the oppressor's power to intimidate preceded all kind of collective and brutal punishments, ending with a large number of dead and wounded among the victims. In 'First Rain', supersonic flights were flown over Gaza to terrorize the entire population, succeeded by the heavy bombardment of vast areas from the sea, sky and land. The logic, the Israeli army explained, was to create pressure so as to weaken the Gaza community's support for the rocket launchers. As was expected, by the Israelis as well, the operation only increased the support for the rocket launchers and gave impetus to their next attempt. The real purpose of that particular operation was experimental. The Israeli generals wished to know how such operations would be received at home, in the region and in the world. And it seems that instantly the answer was 'very well'; namely, no one took an interest in the scores of dead and hundreds of wounded Palestinians left

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behind after the 'First Rain' subsided.

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The bar set continually higher: Palestinians pass by a pool of blood after the Israeli shelling of a residential area in Beit Hanoun in the northern of Gaza Strip in which at least 18 people were killed, 8 November 2006. ([MaanImages/Wesam Saleh](#))

And hence since 'First Rain' and until June 2006, all the following operations were similarly modeled. The difference was in their escalation: more firepower, more casualties and more collateral damage and, as to be expected, more Qassam missiles in response. Accompanying measures in 2006 were more sinister means of ensuring the full imprisonment of the people of Gaza through boycott and blockade, with which the EU is still shamefully collaborating.

The capture of Gilad Shalit in June 2006 was irrelevant in the general scheme of things, but nonetheless provided an opportunity for the Israelis to escalate even more the components of the tactical and allegedly punitive missions. After all, there was still no strategy that followed the tactical decision of Ariel Sharon to take out 8,000 settlers whose presence complicated 'punitive' missions and whose eviction made him almost a candidate for the Nobel Peace Prize. Since then, the 'punitive' actions continue and become themselves a strategy.

The Israeli army loves drama and therefore also escalated the language. 'First Rain' was replaced by 'Summer Rains', a general name that was given to the 'punitive' operations since June 2006 (in a country where there is no rain in the summer, the only precipitation that one can expect are showers of F-16 bombs and artillery shells hitting people of Gaza).

'Summer Rains' brought a novel component: the land invasion into parts of the Gaza Strip. This enabled the army to kill citizens even more effectively and to present it as a result of heavy fighting within dense populated areas, an inevitable result of the circumstances and not of Israeli policies. With the close of summer came operation 'Autumn Clouds' which was even more efficient: on 1 November 2006, in less than 48 hours, the Israelis killed seventy civilians; by the end of that month, with additional mini operations accompanying it, almost two hundred were killed, half of them children and women. As one can see from the dates, some of the activity was parallel to the Israeli attacks on Lebanon, making it easier to complete the operations without much external attention, let alone criticism.

From 'First Rain' to 'Autumn Clouds' one can see escalation in every parameter. The first is the disappearance of the distinction between civilian and non-civilian targets: the senseless killing has turned the population at large to the main target for the army's operation. The second one is the escalation in the means: employment of every possible killing machines the Israeli army possesses. Thirdly, the escalation is conspicuous in the number of casualties: with each

operation, and each future operation, a much larger number of people are likely to be killed and wounded. Finally, and most importantly, the operations become a strategy -- the way Israel intends to solve the problem of the Gaza Strip.

A creeping transfer in the West Bank and a measured genocidal policy in the Gaza Strip are the two strategies Israel employs today. From an electoral point of view, the one in Gaza is problematic as it does not reap any tangible results; the West Bank under Abu Mazen is yielding to Israeli pressure and there is no significant force that arrests the Israeli strategy of annexation and dispossession. But Gaza continues to fire back. On the one hand, this would enable the Israeli army to initiate more massive genocidal operations in the future. But there is also the great danger, on the other, that as happened in 1948, the army would demand a more drastic and systematic 'punitive' and collateral action against the besieged people of the Gaza Strip.



A source of satisfaction for Israel: Palestinians inspect a burnt vehicle belonging to Colonel Mohammad Ghareeb, the deputy chief of preventive security in Jabalia refugee camp in the northern Gaza Strip. The vehicle was burnt during factional clashes between Fatah and Hamas. ([MaanImages/Wesam Saleh](#))

Ironically, the Israeli killing machine has rested lately. Even relatively large number of Qassam missiles, including one or two quite deadly ones, did not stir the army to action. Though the army's spokesmen say it shows 'restraint', it never did in the past and is not likely to do so in the future. The army rests, as its generals are content with the internal killing that rages on in Gaza and does the job for them. They watch with satisfaction the emerging civil war in Gaza, which Israel foments and encourages. From Israel's point of view it does not really matter how Gaza would eventually be demographically downsized, be it by internal or Israeli slaying. The responsibility of ending the internal fighting lies of course with the Palestinian groups themselves, but the American and Israeli interference, the continued imprisonment, the starvation and strangulation of Gaza are all factors that make such an internal peace process very difficult. But it will take place soon and then with the first early sign that it subsided, the Israeli 'Summer Rains' will fall down again on the people of Gaza, wreaking havoc and death.

And one should never tire of stating the inevitable political conclusions from this dismal reality of the year we left behind and in the face of the one that awaits us. There is still no other way of stopping Israel than besides boycott, divestment and sanctions. We should all support it clearly, openly, unconditionally, regardless of what the gurus of our world tell us about the efficiency or *raison d'être* of such actions. The UN would not intervene in Gaza as it does in Africa; the Nobel peace laureates would not enlist to its defense as they do for causes in Southeast Asia. The numbers of people killed there are not staggering as far as other calamities are concerned, and it is not a new story --

it is dangerously old and troubling. The only soft point of this killing machine is its oxygen lines to 'western' civilization and public opinion. It is still possible to puncture them and make it at least more difficult for the Israelis to implement their future strategy of eliminating the Palestinian people either by cleansing them in the West Bank or genociding them in the Gaza Strip.

Ilan Pappé is senior lecturer in the University of Haifa Department of political Science and Chair of the Emil Touma Institute for Palestinian Studies in Haifa. His books include, among others, [The Making of the Arab-Israeli Conflict](#) (London and New York 1992), [The Israel/Palestine Question](#) (London and New York 1999), [A History of Modern Palestine](#) (Cambridge 2003), [The Modern Middle East](#) (London and New York 2005) and his latest, [Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine](#) (2006).

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