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War of Choice: How Israel Manufactured the Gaza Escalation

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War of Choice: How Israel Manufactured the Gaza Escalation
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Israel has repeatedly claimed that it had "no choice" but to wage war on Gaza on December 27 because Hamas had broken a ceasefire, was firing rockets at Israeli civilians, and had "tried everything in order to avoid this military operation," as Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni put it.

This claim, however, is widely at odds with the fact that Israel's military and political leadership took many aggressive steps during the ceasefire that escalated a crisis with Hamas, and possibly even provoked Hamas to create a pretext for the assault. This wasn't a war of "no choice," but rather a very avoidable war in which Israeli actions played the major role in instigating.

Israel has a long history of deliberately using violence and other provocative measures to trigger reactions in order to create a pretext for military action, and to portray its opponents as the aggressors and Israel as the victim. According to the respected Israeli military historian Zeev Maoz in his recent book, *Defending the Holy Land*, Israel most notably used this policy of "strategic escalation" in 1955-1956, when it launched deadly raids on Egyptian army positions to provoke Egypt's President Nasser into violent reprisals preceding its ill-fated invasion of Egypt; in 1981-1982, when it launched violent raids on Lebanon in order to provoke Palestinian escalation preceding the Israeli invasion of Lebanon; and between 2001-2004, when Prime Minister Ariel Sharon repeatedly ordered assassinations of high-level Palestinian militants during declared ceasefires, provoking violent attacks that enabled Israel's virtual reoccupation of the West Bank.

Israel's current assault on Gaza bears many trademark elements of Israel's long history of employing "strategic escalation" to manufacture a major crisis, if not a war.

Making War 'Inevitable'

The countdown to a war began, according to a detailed report by Barak Raviv in the Israeli newspaper Haaretz, when Israel's Defense Minister Ehud Barak started planning the current attack on Gaza with his chiefs of staff at least six months ago — even as Israel was negotiating the Egyptian brokered ceasefire with Hamas that went into effect on June 19. During the subsequent ceasefire, the report contends, the Israeli security establishment carefully gathered intelligence to map out Hamas' security infrastructure, engaged in operational deception, and spread disinformation to mislead the public about its intentions.

This revelation doesn't confirm that Israel intended to start a war with Hamas in December, but it does shed some light on why Israel continuously took steps that undermined the terms of the fragile ceasefire with Hamas, even though Hamas respected their side of the agreement.

Indeed, there was a genuine lull in rocket and mortar fire between June 19 and November 4, due to Hamas compliance and only sporadically violated by a small number of launchings carried out by rival Fatah and Islamic Jihad militants, largely in defiance of Hamas. According to the conservative Israeli-based Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center's analysis of rocket and missile attacks in 2008, there were only three rockets fired at Israel in July, September, and October combined. Israeli civilians living near Gaza experienced an almost unprecedented degree of security during this period, with no Israeli casualties.

Yet despite the major lull, Israel continually raided the West Bank, arresting and frequently killing "wanted" Palestinians from June to October, which had the inevitable effect of ratcheting up pressure on Hamas to respond. Moreover, while the central expectation of Hamas going into the ceasefire was that Israel would lift the siege on Gaza, Israel only took the barest steps to ease the siege, which kept the people at a bare survival level. This policy was a clear affront to Hamas, and had the inescapable effect of undermining both Hamas and popular Palestinian support for the ceasefire.

But Israel's most provocative action, acknowledged by many now as the critical turning point that undermined the ceasefire, took place on November 4, when Israeli forces auspiciously violated the truce by crossing into the Gaza Strip to destroy what the army said was a tunnel dug by Hamas, killing six Hamas militants. Sara Roy, writing in the *London Review of Books*, contends this attack was "no doubt designed finally to undermine the truce between Israel and Hamas established last June."

The Israeli breach into Gaza was immediately followed by a further provocation by Israel on November 5, when the Israeli government hermetically sealed off all ways into and out of Gaza. As a result, the UN reports that the amount of imports entering Gaza has been "severely reduced to an average of 16 truckloads per day — down from 123 truckloads per day in October and 475 trucks per day in May 2007 — before the Hamas takeover." These limited shipments provide only a fraction of the supplies needed to sustain 1.5 million starving Palestinians.

In response, Hamas predictably claimed that Israel had violated the truce and allowed Islamic Jihad to launch a round of rocket attacks on Israel. Only after lethal Israeli reprisals killed over 10 Hamas gunmen in the following days did Hamas militants finally respond with volleys of mortars and rockets of their own. In two short weeks, Israel killed over 15 Palestinian militants, while about 120 rockets and mortars were fired at Israel, and although there were no Israeli casualties the calm had been shattered.

It was at this time that Israeli officials launched what appears to have been a coordinated media blitz to cultivate public reception for an impending conflict, stressing the theme of the "inevitability" of a coming war with Hamas in Gaza. On November 12, senior IDF officials announced that war with Hamas was likely in the two months after the six-month ceasefire, baldly stating it would occur even if Hamas wasn't interested in confrontation. A few days later, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert publicly ordered his military commanders to draw up plans for a war in Gaza, which were already well developed at the time. On November 19, according to Raviv's report in *Haaretz*, the Gaza war plan was brought before Barak for final approval.

While the rhetoric of an "inevitable" war with Hamas may have only been Israeli bluster to compel Hamas into line, its actions on the ground in the critical month leading up to the official expiration of the ceasefire on December 19 only heightened the cycle of violence, leaving a distinct impression Israel had cast the die for war.

Finally, Hamas then walked right into the "inevitable war" that Israel had been preparing since the ceasefire had gone into effect in June. With many Palestinians believing the ceasefire to be meaningless, Hamas announced it wouldn't renew the ceasefire after it expired on December 19. Hamas

then stood back for two days while Islamic Jihad and Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades militants fired volleys of mortars and rockets into Israel, in the context of mutually escalating attacks. Yet even then, with Israeli threats of war mounting, Hamas imposed a 24-hour ceasefire on all missile attacks on December 21, announcing it would consider renewing the lapsed truce with Israel in the Gaza Strip if Israel would halt its raids in both Gaza and the West Bank, and keep Gaza border crossings open for supplies of aid and fuel. Israel immediately rejected its offer.

But when the Israel Defence Forces killed three Hamas militants laying explosives near the security fence between Israel and Gaza on the evening of December 23, the Hamas military wing lashed out by launching a barrage of over 80 missiles into Israel the following day, claiming it was Israel, and not Hamas, that was responsible for the escalation.

Little did they know that, according to Raviv, Prime Minister Olmert, and Defense Minister Barak had already met on December 18 to approve the impending war plan, but put the mission off waiting for a better pretext. By launching more than 170 rockets and mortars at Israeli civilians in the days following December 23, killing one Israeli civilian, Hamas had provided reason enough for Israel to unleash its long-planned attack on Gaza on December 27.

The Rationale for War

If Israel's goal were simply to end rocket attacks on its civilians, it would have solidified and extended the ceasefire, which was working well, until November. Even after November, it could have addressed Hamas' longstanding ceasefire proposals for a complete end to rocket-fire on Israel, in exchange for Israel lifting its crippling 18-month siege on Gaza.

Instead, the actual targets of its assault on Gaza after December 27, which included police stations, mosques, universities, and Hamas government institutions, clearly reveal that Israel's primary goals go far beyond providing immediate security for its citizens. Israeli spokespersons repeatedly claim that Israel's assault isn't about seeking to effect regime change with Hamas, but rather about creating a "new security reality" in Gaza. But that "new reality" requires Israel to use massive violence to degrade the political and military capacity of Hamas, to a point where it agrees to a ceasefire with conditions more congenial to Israel. Short of a complete reoccupation of Gaza, no amount of violence will erase Hamas from the scene.

Confirming the steps needed to create the "new reality," the broader reasons why Israel chose a major confrontation with Hamas at this time appear to be the cause of several other factors unrelated to providing immediate security for its citizens.

First, many senior Israeli political and military leaders strongly opposed the June 19 ceasefire with Hamas, and looked for opportunities to reestablish Israel's fabled "deterrent capability" of instilling fear into its enemies. These leaders felt Israel's deterrent capability was badly damaged as a result of their withdrawal from Gaza in 2005, and especially after the widely criticized failures in the 2006 Israeli war with Hezbollah. For this powerful group a ceasefire was at best a tactical pause before the inevitable renewal of conflict, when conditions were more favorable. Immediately following Israel's aerial assault, a New York Times article noted that Israel had been eager "to remind its foes that it has teeth" and to erase the ghost of Lebanon that has haunted it over the past two years.

A second factor was pressure surrounding the impending elections set to take place in early February. The ruling coalition, led by Barak and Livni, have been repeatedly criticized by the Likud leader Benjamin Netanyahu, the former prime minister, who is leading in the polls, for not being tough enough on Hamas and rocket-fire from Gaza. This gave the ruling coalition a strong incentive to demonstrate to the Israeli people their security credentials in order to bolster their chances against the more hawkish Likud.

Third, Hamas repeatedly said it wouldn't recognize Mahmud Abbas as



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president of the Palestinian Authority after his term runs out on January 9. The looming political standoff on the Palestinian side threatens to boost Hamas and undermine Abbas, who had overseen closer security coordination with Israel and was congenial to Israeli demands for concessions on future peace proposals. One possible outcome of this assault is that Abbas will remain in power for a while longer, since Hamas will be unable to mobilise its supporters in order to force him to resign.

And finally, Israel was pressed to take action now due to its sense of the American political timeline. The Bush administration rarely exerted constraint on Israel and would certainly stand by in its waning days, while Barack Obama would not likely want to begin his presidency with a major confrontation with Israel. The Washington Post quoted a Bush administration official saying that Israel struck in Gaza "because they want it to be over before the next administration comes in. They can't predict how the next administration will handle it. And this is not the way they want to start with the new administration."

An Uncertain Ending

As the conflict rages to an uncertain end, it's important to consider Israeli military historian Zeev Maoz's contention that Israel's history of manufacturing wars through "strategic escalation" and using overwhelming force to achieve "deterrence" has never been successful. In fact, it's the primary cause of Israel's insecurity because it deepens hatred and a desire for revenge rather than fear.

At the same time, there's no question Hamas continues to callously sacrifice its fellow Palestinian citizens, as well as Israeli civilians, on the altar of maintaining its pyrrhic resistance credentials and its myopic preoccupation with revenge, and fell into many self-made traps of its own. There had been growing international pressure on Israel to ease its siege and a major increase in creative and nonviolent strategies drawing attention to the plight of Palestinians such as the arrival of humanitarian relief convoys off of Gaza's coast in the past months, but now Gaza lies in ruins.

But as the vastly more powerful actor holding nearly all the cards in this conflict, the war in Gaza was ultimately Israel's choice. And for all this bloodshed and violence, Israel must be held accountable.

With the American political establishment firmly behind Israel's attack, and Obama's foreign policy team heavily weighted with pro-Israel insiders like Dennis Ross and Hillary Clinton, any efforts to hold Israel accountable in the United States will depend upon American citizens mobilizing a major grassroots effort behind a new foreign policy that will not tolerate any violations of international law, including those by Israel, and will immediately work towards ending Israel's siege of Gaza and ending Israel's occupation.

Beyond that, the most promising prospect for holding Israel accountable is through the increasing use of universal jurisdiction for prosecuting war crimes, along with the growing transnational movement calling for sanctions on Israel until it ends its violations of international law. In what would be truly be a new style of foreign policy, a transnational network that focuses on Israeli violations of international law, rather than the state itself, could become a counterweight that forces policymakers in the United States, Europe, and Israel to reconsider their political and moral complicity in the current war, in favor of taking real steps towards peace and security in the region for all peoples.

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