

Palestine / Israel - Gaza: The making of a massacre

Friday 13 April 2018, by [RUDER Eric](#), [THIER Daphna](#) (Date first published: 12 April 2018).

On March 30, Israel carried out a massacre as tens of thousands gathered in Gaza to demand the right to return to their homes on land occupied by the Israeli state, and from which they were ethnically cleansed. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) killed at least 17 and injured 1,500. One week later, on April 6, Israel carried out another massacre [1], killing another nine people, including a journalist and two teenagers, and injuring 1,000 more.

Several days before the second massacre, SocialistWorker.org contributor Daphna Thier, who grew up in Jerusalem, spoke with Eric Ruder about the domestic factors in Israeli society that led to the IDF's rampage on March 30. Tragically, her prediction that another massacre was likely came true just days after the interview took place.

Eric Ruder - CAN YOU talk about the general context for the March 30 mobilization to the Gaza border?

Daphna Thier - FOR ONE, it's important to note that the March 30 rally and the establishment of encampments is part of a six-week protest plan. Hamas sent enforcements to help set up the encampment, so Israel painted this as Hamas funneling all this money into the effort, echoing what Trump said about "paid protesters" during the Women's Marches the day after his inauguration in January 2017 [2].

And so Israel, in the days leading up to the protests, was preparing itself and knew—absolutely knew—that they were going in with fire.

The Israeli message was basically this: Anyone who goes to the border, anyone who is participating in this, is a terrorist. We have a right to defend our sovereignty. You're participating with Hamas. Hamas doesn't care about you.

All of those are things that we've heard so many times before—that Hamas uses people as human shields, that Hamas is playing games with the lives of people in Gaza. But the Israeli message didn't deter people—because they're not paid!

In fact, just the week before, three Palestinians made it into Israeli territory—apparently walked for hours, walked past different Israeli towns and made it to an Israeli base with some knives and grenades—and seemed to want absolutely nothing except to get arrested, because that's how dire the conditions in Gaza are.

The biggest problem is that Palestinians must live in an open-air prison. They're totally suffocated, and they have very few means. It's Israel that doesn't care about Palestinian life.

People showed up for the protests at the border because it's a matter of life or death—because the question of the right of return is a living, breathing question. They're refugees, and many of them

want to return to their homes. That's what this is about.

And let's be real—they don't actually get anywhere near the wall. Israeli troops enforce a buffer zone of 300 meters. Essentially, Israel's vast military power gives it the might necessary to extend its sovereignty into Gaza's territory—in the same way that Israel controls Gaza's coastline, its airspace, its water supplies, everything.

So this is really an act of heroism on the part of tens of thousands of unarmed Palestinians, and it's just the beginning. We don't know what the response is going to be and how many more people will show up from week to week until the May 15 commemoration of the Nakba [Arabic for "catastrophe"], as Palestinians refer to the ethnic cleansing that accompanied the establishment of the Israeli state in 1948.

Many who mobilized to the border were pushed out of their homes in 1948, and then pushed out again after the 1967 war, when Israel occupied the West Bank and Gaza and seized control of the Golan Heights.

So I think there's a question here of the political righteousness of unarmed protesters on the one hand, and how Israel seeks to portray the mobilization as "terrorist infiltration."

In this regard, Israel has the support of the majority of its population. The majority of Israelis agree that the breach of Palestinians through the Gaza border would be a huge affront to their security, regardless of whether they're armed or unarmed. This "vocal majority" also supported the action of the IDF on March 30.

By contrast, the chattering classes who make up Israel's political analysts and military commentators were troubled by what they predict will be the further isolation of Israel in reaction to the massacre of unarmed demonstrators.

They see "the Trump factor" as a critical one emboldening the regime of Israeli Prime Benjamin Netanyahu.

In the wake of Trump's election, there's no talk of two states anymore, there's hardly any talk about stopping the settlements from growing, and the U.S. is moving its embassy to Jerusalem. All of this is legitimizing the further colonization of Palestine that has been Israel's goal from the beginning, but it is more naked and transparent than ever.

BUT IS there also the sense that Israel should be taking advantage of the opportunities created by having Trump in the White House?

NOT REALLY. The predominant concern is an anxiety about whether being in cahoots with the Trump administration is the smart thing to do.

One analyst called it a double-edged sword. Right now, it may seem like Israel is on top of the world, but because Trump is so hated globally, being on his side is not actually a good thing in the long run for Israel.

And Netanyahu is facing a slew of corruption charges and fighting for his political survival [3]. In this context, a massacre of Palestinians helps him deflect attention from the charge that he is in cahoots with wealthy and powerful interests while neglecting the average Israeli. A massacre feeds the fire of patriotism and hatred of "the other."

Netanyahu is quite resilient. And that has raised a lot of questions within Israeli society about

whether or not he should continue to be the prime minister.

But on the question of Gaza, the pressure on Netanyahu is to “get tough” from both the hard-right and center-Zionist parties. This plays well with the Israeli electorate. But obviously to the rest of the world, it didn’t look as good—hence the critique among mainstream voices asking, “Have they overstepped?”

But meanwhile, they’re not only preparing to continue to use live fire on Palestinian protesters, they’re actually expanding their capacity to do so. They added more than 100 snipers to their already-existing deployment over there, and they’re putting more IDF soldiers there.

There’s also a section of the security and police establishment that has been arguing for a policing strategy rather than a military strategy to deal with the protesters. They’re saying, “This is not a military confrontation. You need crowd control, you need police forces, you need these special units that can deal with protesters like they deal with them in the West Bank.”

But from the IDF’s perspective, I think a couple things are important.

One, as long as they keep Palestinians in Gaza, they’re going to treat them as a foreign force, and because the IDF has been recently humiliated by the ease with which various Palestinians have crossed into Israeli territory, they see dealing with these protests as an opportunity to reassert themselves—to show that they can defend the homeland.

They’ve also been engaged in this ongoing offensive against the tunnels [\[4\]](#), which are the only way many critical supplies get into Gaza. So this is a kind of drawing of a line in the sand. And as far as the government is concerned, they’re sending in the military to solve this issue. The military confronts Palestinians, and Palestinians are the enemy—end of story.

Finally, there’s the military’s impulse to use the battlefield of Gaza as a laboratory to test the constant development of military technology in Israel. During these protests specifically, new drone technology was used, as Sumaya A. reported in an earlier Socialist Worker article [\[5\]](#).

By my calculation, just over 10 percent of the Israeli economy is connected to the arms industry and military. It’s hard to say how much that influences any one particular decision, but the overall policy is consistent. Violence is lucrative.

So some of the more mainstream analysts are saying that there’s no future in this—that this is deepening Israel’s political crisis. The fear is that this legitimizes Hamas, that this “makes Hamas look good,” because Israel is shooting at nonviolent protesters.

Now, these analysts don’t actually believe that Hamas is nonviolent. They don’t even believe necessarily that the protests are nonviolent, but they think that this is a political victory for Hamas, and that the more Israel plays into it, the worse it’s going to look. That’s from their perspective.

Obviously, the reality is that these encampments and this protest movement wasn’t initiated by Hamas. There are lots of groups involved in it, and these are Palestinians fighting for their most basic right to return to their home.

So there’s a profound legitimacy to what they’re doing. But from the perspective of Israel, the right of return is a great threat. And nonviolent protesters—they don’t know how to deal with that.

RIGHT, NONVIOLENT protesters are Israel’s worst nightmare. Israel prefers actions that they can demonize as “terrorism,” and they still try to use that label to tarnish any and all

resistance. But when it's nonviolent resistance, they're in a bind.

THE FEAR on the Israeli side is that Hamas won't trip up.

The thing about Hamas is that it isn't actually one homogenous organization. There are individuals with differing ideas, and there are various other groups, including militant armed groups. Plus there are people who are members of Hamas, but who might not adhere to all the various positions of the party.

So the fear on Israel's part is that Hamas will actually be able to rein that in and maintain a continued nonviolent protest. For example, there were two Palestinians who fired back at the IDF on March 30, and that was the first story in the Israeli news—before they ever mentioned any of the deaths on the Palestinian side. In fact, the news didn't really cover the protests at all on that first evening, which was Passover. Then, at some point, they stopped everything to say that there were these two Palestinians shooting at IDF forces.

I'm hopeful that we'll see even more protesters arrive at the encampment for the protests on subsequent Fridays. At the same time, Israel is bulking itself up to continue down this path, so we're likely to see more killings of Palestinians by Israeli troops.

Palestinians have shown over time just how resilient and how brave they are. So here's the other thing, which is a regional question, and it's a question both for Israel, but also for Egypt, for Jordan and for the Palestinian Authority: that the Palestinian protests at the Gaza border will inspire popular support among their own populations.

Already on March 30, there were solidarity rallies in the West Bank. The next day in Jordan, there was a vigil organized by one of its largest professional unions, the engineers' union, in honor of those who were killed in Palestine. And historically, there's been a relationship between the revolutionary forces in Egypt and the people in Gaza.

So the region's ruling classes are worried about what kind of effect these protests will have down the line on their own populations, and whether or not they can control that. And so they've all come out with statements against Israel's reaction in an effort to co-opt and subdue popular anger.

Especially Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas—he called on the international community to scrutinize Israel for what it's done, and then he said that this was obviously all about the will of the Palestinian people for a state within the '67 borders. Of course, that's just Abbas' wishful thinking.

Obviously, that's not what this is about. These are people marching toward Israel to demand the right to return to their homes inside the Green Line.

Abbas is hoping to channel this outrage into a demand that is acceptable to the Israeli forces with which he collaborates, and to speak for a section of the Palestinian elite that seeks to establish itself as rulers over even a tiny sliver of historic Palestine. These are the various reasons that Abbas and the PA reject the right of return as a legitimate demand.

Zionists who are taking the long view are really concerned that Netanyahu should stop inflaming the situation. They worry about how the Palestinian struggle connects in people's minds around the world with the struggles of Mahatma Gandhi against British rule, with the struggle of Black South Africans against apartheid, and with the civil rights struggle of Black people in the U.S.

Chemi Shalev—who is a fairly average Zionist, pretty right wing in the end—was saying exactly this.

He expressed his angst about how Israel is going to look like the bad guys, and he wondered in an op-ed piece how Israel had allowed itself to be boxed in like this.

So there's a debate within the establishment. There's the brutality of the Netanyahu government, which is looking to escalate for its own short-term reasons. There's the "rational" Zionist strategy counseling to see the big picture. And there's broad public opinion in favor of the government's response.

And at the same time, there's the steadfast resolve of Palestinians seeking to revive a movement for nothing less than the right of return and to be seen in the global community as righteous. Already, they've accomplished something huge, and we can only hope for that to deepen.

P.S.

* April 12, 2018:

<https://socialistworker.org/2018/04/12/the-making-of-a-massacre>

* Transcription by Jordan Weinstein.

Footnotes

[1] <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/06/world/middleeast/gaza-palestinian-protest-israel.html>

[2] <https://socialistworker.org/2017/01/23/he-made-america-protest-again>

[3] <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/articles/2018-04-10/support-for-netanyahu-remains-strong-despite-allegations>

[4] <https://socialistworker.org/2018/01/22/starving-gaza-one-tunnel-at-a-time>

[5] ESSF (article 43908), [Gaza: Israel responds to land protests with a massacre](#).