

# Israel's war on Gaza and the role of the Middle East bourgeoisie

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As people all over the world react with shock and anger to Israel's genocidal offensive against defenceless Palestinians in Gaza, it is important to review the factors that have enabled this blitzkrieg to occur.

Firstly, the Israeli government has the unconditional support of the United States, which has for decades provided Israel with the military, economic and diplomatic backing necessary to carry out its role as US policeman in the region and to pursue its own geopolitical agenda.

Secondly, the European powers have provided crucial cover by justifying Israel's war crimes as legitimate acts of self defence and are working to secure a cease-fire acceptable to Washington and Tel Aviv that will involve Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and the US puppet regime of Mahmoud Abbas's Palestinian Authority (PA) policing Gaza.

But this points to a third crucial factor whose political significance in the catastrophe that has befallen the Palestinians has long been underplayed: the role of the bourgeoisie in the Middle East.

The ruling elites have not only failed to come to the aid of the Palestinians, but have supported Israel's actions and worked strenuously to demobilise the widespread opposition within their own countries.

In 1979, Egypt, the most populous and powerful Arab state, was the first to openly abandon the Palestinians and make peace with Israel and thereby the US. While Egypt was initially ostracised by its neighbours, today it is only the most explicit in its relations with Tel Aviv and Washington.

Since Israel's military withdrawal from Gaza in 2005, President Hosni Mubarak has played a key role in turning Gaza into an open-air prison by agreeing to police its southern border at Rafah, restrict the movement of people and goods and enforce the blockade.

Last June, Mubarak brokered a cease-fire between Hamas and Israel, but refused along with Israel to lift the blockade on Gaza, Hamas's primary reason for entering the deal. While restrictions were marginally eased, Gaza's imports were always far below what was required and exports remained nonexistent.

It was Israel that broke the cease-fire on November 4 by launching an incursion into Gaza and killing six members of the Qassem Brigades, Hamas's militant wing. Its aim was to provoke retaliatory action by Hamas and provide a justification for the bloody offensive now under way. Egypt responded by working with Israel to tighten the blockade even further. The border closures, along with the closure of its airstrip and ports by Israel, has cut Gaza off from the rest of the world, and brought about a humanitarian disaster.

Egypt claims that it cannot reopen the Rafah crossing without PA officials and European Union observers, as set out in a 2005 US-sponsored trilateral agreement between Israel, the PA and the EU. But as Egypt was not even a signatory to the agreement, which expired after one year and was not renewed, this is just an excuse to keep Rafah sealed and Hamas, which is closely related to the Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt's largest opposition party, isolated.

But Egypt's collaboration with Israel goes far beyond the border issue. It has made no effort to counter the false propaganda put out by Israel that it was Hamas that broke the ceasefire agreement. Neither has it condemned the assassination of Hamas leaders.

All the signs indicate that Israel and Egypt have coordinated their actions from the start of Operation Cast Lead. Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni went to Cairo less than 48 hours before the attack on Gaza began, and briefed Mubarak and Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul-Gheit about Israel's intentions, receiving tacit approval for the assault.

Hamdi Hassan, a Muslim Brotherhood MP, said, "Israel would not have hit Gaza like this without a green light from Egypt. The Egyptian government allowed this assault on Gaza in hopes of finishing off Hamas."

Hamas spokesman Fawzi Barhoum said his organisation had received false assurances from Egypt, immediately following the Cairo talks, that an Israeli attack on the strip was not imminent.

Egyptian security pulled back from Rafah before Israel's attacks, confirming that they had been warned in advance by Israel. The Egyptian government sealed the border during the first two days of the war and forbade all aid convoys from entering Gaza. It only allowed in limited aid on the third and fourth days, and that was only due to mounting popular pressure.

French President Nicolas Sarkozy is now in talks with Mubarak to secure his agreement to the deployment of an international force on Gaza's southern border in Egypt and a naval force off the Gaza coast. Egypt and the Fatah controlled Palestinian Authority would be tasked with policing Gaza. This would free Israel from its responsibility as the occupying power under international law for feeding Gaza's 1.5 million population and provide a means of restoring Abbas's rule to Gaza.

Mubarak is as yet hesitating, though he has refused to permanently open the Rafah border crossing, the only Gaza passage that does not pass through Israel, until the Palestinian Authority, led by Abbas, assumes control of the border. He fears that such a deal would even further inflame domestic public opinion, an outcome from which the Muslim Brotherhood would profit. However, his dependence on financial assistance from Washington and Europe means that he is only holding out for better terms.

The other Arab regimes are no less compliant.

Jordan has long functioned as a US client state in the region, with its former ruler, King Hussein, on the CIA payroll for years. With Palestinian refugees and their descendants forming the majority of the population, Hussein was always one of the foremost opponents of Palestinian nationalism since it would de-legitimise his own rule. On his own admission, he spent more than 1,000 hours in secret negotiations with Israel.

Following the Oslo Peace Accords between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organisation, Jordan signed a deal with Israel in 1994, opening up trade relations between the two countries. In this latest assault on Gaza, King Abdullah has stood by and watched the slaughter. Domestic

opposition to Israel has forced him to become more vocal in his opposition to Israel, but his one action has been to personally give blood for Gaza victims.

The oil-rich states such as Saudi Arabia have also confined their opposition to Israel's assault on Gaza to ritual condemnations. The Saudis have blamed Hamas for the offensive, saying that the "massacre would not have happened if the Palestinian people were united behind one leadership."

The 22-member Arab League is so politically bankrupt that it refused to call an emergency summit meeting, so as not to expose themselves and further antagonise their own citizens, whose demonstrations have opposed both Israel and their own governments' complicity. Instead, its foreign ministers meeting in Cairo merely called for the assault to stop while agreeing that no Arab army would intervene.

The so-called radical states such as Iran and Syria, and Hezbollah in Lebanon, which have close relations with Hamas, have acted no differently.

Iran, which is Hamas's main financial backer, has abandoned its ally in the interest of getting closer to Washington.

Despite President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's oft-quoted and reactionary threats to "wipe Israel off the map," Iran has made it clear that it too is not in the business of confrontation with Israel. If there had ever been any real content to Iran's threats against Israel, the assault on Gaza should have provided the *casus belli*. Instead Iran's top commander of the revolutionary guards, Mohammad-Ali Jafari, said that Gazans needed no help and could rely on their own "hand made" weapons and rockets.

Former President Hashemi Rafsanjani called on Muslims to provide both humanitarian and military supplies to the people of Gaza. "There is no shortage of fighters in Gaza. The Islamic nation should extend political assistance and give weapons to the people in Gaza," Rafsanjani said.

An Iranian military commander called on Muslim oil producers to halt sales to Israel's supporters—a hollow plea in the context of low and declining oil prices.

On the diplomatic front, Saeed Jalili, the head of Iran's National Security Council, its chief nuclear negotiator and a close adviser to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, went to Syria and Lebanon to coordinate their responses and prevent the Gazan conflict from becoming a regional war. Speaking on Hezbollah's Al Manar television network last week, he essentially told Hamas that it was on its own. According to Arab sources, Jalili went further and expressed Tehran's willingness to secure a deal to end the fighting.

Syria, the sole Arab state member of the "Resistance Front," which hosts Hamas leader Khaled Mashaal in Damascus, recently renewed its relations with the European powers and there have been hints of a renewed dialogue with the US under an Obama administration. Consequently, it too has no intention of engaging in war with Israel. Its sole contribution has been to suspend informal talks with Israel to secure a peace deal and return of the Golan Heights seized by Israel in 1967 and to meet with Sarkozy during his visit to the Middle East to craft an end to hostilities on terms acceptable to Israel and the US.

In Lebanon, which is led by a US puppet government, any opposition to US imperialism and support for the Palestinians is associated with Hezbollah, which is backed by Iran. Hezbollah too has left Hamas in the lurch. This contrasts sharply with 2006, where 12 days after Israel launched a massive attack on Gaza, Hezbollah opened up a second front on Israel's northern border and fought Israel to a standstill.

Now part of the government—and focused on elections in June, when it is expected to increase its vote and become the largest parliamentary party—and with no backing from Iran for any hostilities against Israel, Hezbollah is in no mood to compromise its domestic political objectives.

Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, had earlier all but promised that he would not engage in another war with Israel, saying that he would not

have ordered the cross-border raid that precipitated the 2006 conflict if he had known that Israel would respond with a 34-day war that killed 1,000 people and left much of the country in ruins.

At a massive rally, Nasrallah urged the Arab and Islamic world to rise up in support of Gaza. He warned Israel that any ground offensive into Gaza would result in many losses for the Israelis. But while saying he would not abandon Gaza, he offered no concrete support. Instead, he warned his own fighters to be alert in case Israel decided to attack Lebanon under conditions where Israel has called up thousands of reservists for its northern front.

When two Katyusha rockets fired from south Lebanon exploded in northern Israel last week, leading to Israel firing five artillery shells at Lebanon, a Hezbollah government minister denied any involvement by Hezbollah. The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC) has since claimed responsibility.

Ali Fayyad, a former Hezbollah official and the director of a research institute affiliated with Hezbollah, justified not coming to Hamas' aid by claiming that Hamas was doing well on its own. "We are not pessimistic about the future of the fighting," he said. "We consider that the resistance is strong enough, and we think Israelis are making the same mistake they made in the July 2006 war."

So marked is Hezbollah's stance that Arab newspapers have pointed out in support of their own despotic rulers the obvious discrepancy between Nasrallah's words and actions.

The actions of the ruling elites across the region contrast starkly with widespread demonstrations that have called for action against Israel. It demonstrates that the realisation of the basic democratic and national tasks in the oppressed nations can only be achieved through the independent political mobilisation of the working class on the basis of a socialist and internationalist perspective.

The resolution of the Palestinian question, which has been the focus of bitter conflicts and political tragedy for nearly a century, is inseparably bound up with the success of the socialist revolution in the Middle East and internationally. The central question this poses is the unification of the Arab and Jewish working class in the struggle to overthrow all the despotic bourgeois regimes of the region and build a socialist federation of the Middle East.



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