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Israel's War of Attrition in Gaza

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JULY 25-27, 2014

Following World War II U.S. General Curtis LeMay, the reported inspiration for the psychotic General Jack Ripper in Stanley Kubrick's dark comedy *Dr. Strangelove*, was said to have remarked that had the Allies lost the war he would likely have been hanged as a war criminal for the bombing of Tokyo. Hundreds of thousands of Japanese civilians perished under American bombs in a series of raids on the Japanese city. Separately, the Japanese leadership was widely reported to have been ready to surrender before atomic bombs were dropped on primarily civilian populations in the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. With this history it seems difficult to remember that upon entering World War I aerial bombardment of a civilian population was widely understood to be a war crime.

As it was applied to the U.S. war on Southeast Asia (Vietnam) the term 'war of attrition' was barely veiled code for a racist slaughter, the 'kill ratio' of 58,000 U.S. soldiers to 3,500,000 Vietnamese and likely millions more in Cambodia and Laos is evidence of a degree of military mismatch perhaps better called genocide. The theory behind the term is that causing an 'appropriate' level of death and destruction against one's enemies produces two outcomes: it turns people against 'their own' governments causing a loss of internal political support for them and it kills so many potential adversaries that there is no 'will' (no one) left to fight. The dim socio-pathology of the U.S. strategy in Vietnam can be found in the utter implausibility of the

largely agrarian-peasant population having any geopolitical ‘vision’ at all, let alone on the side of ‘their’ enemies for preceding millennia, the Chinese.

When Ronald Reagan launched his war of terror against the people of Nicaragua in the early 1980s the articulated view in his administration was that if U.S. / CIA proxies (Contras) murdered enough people and blew up enough bridges and schools those who had supported the Nicaraguan Revolution just a few years earlier would turn against the revolutionary government (FSLN). Events in Nicaragua came on the heels of the Iranian Revolution that saw the overthrow of the CIA / MI5 installed ‘Shah’ whose brutal ‘rule’ served as a front for Western expropriation of Iranian oil. In the name of ‘freedom’ the Contras carried out a campaign of terror against the people of Nicaragua that included torturing and murdering tens of thousands of civilians, including slaughtering entire villages. The strategy appeared to ‘work’ when in 1990 the terrorized population of Nicaragua voted out the Revolutionary government in favor of one more advantageous to U.S. ‘interests.’ However, once the murders and destruction ended the Sandanistas were voted back into power. Apparently state terrorism can create a stopping point but not an end.

‘War of attrition’ completes the shift from armies meeting on battlefields to kill and maim one another to the explicit targeting of civilian populations in wars of state terror. Historically, the specific targeting of civilian populations was ancillary and direct— before aerial bombardment and long-range missiles the capacity for modern technocratic slaughter from a ‘safe’ distance was limited. Fighter pilots in WWII faced real risk of death. By the time of the American war on South East Asia bomber pilots flew five miles high to release bombs that killed people they never had contact with. Likewise, the Israeli pilots bombing Gaza today do so from safe distances and can tell themselves that they are bombing ‘targets’ rather than human beings. Left unsaid is that killing and maiming a civilian population to affect a political outcome is the definition of terrorism. This is the ‘practical’ purpose of the Israeli ‘human shield’ charge against Hamas— to shift culpability for terrorist violence onto its (Israel’s) victims.

By the mid-2000s the improbable term ‘democratization’ was being tossed around as George W. Bush scrambled for a plausible justification of the U.S. war on Iraq in the absence of having found WMDs (weapons of mass destruction). In contrast to the reasonably inferred ‘planned chaos’ explanation of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, a number of the neo-cons Mr. Bush surrounded himself with appeared so arrogant and dimly ideological that they believed the ‘democratization’ storyline. Mr. Bush was reported to have supported the elections in Gaza and he even ‘allowed’ Hamas to challenge Fatah in them. When Hamas won the election was quickly re-framed by Israel and the U.S. as a ‘coup.’ At the time the cognitive dissonance between Bush-Cheney-neo-con blather about ‘democracy’ and the near instantaneous collective punishment inflicted on the citizens of Gaza for acting ‘democratically’ seemed too conspicuous to be readily overcome. As history had it, the received distance in the West between ‘democracy’ and the slaughter of the captive Palestinian population to affect a political outcome is less than one might imagine.

The current storyline from Israel of ‘defensive’ aerial bombardment and ‘precision targeting’ in Gaza is met with the facts of Israel’s ‘Iron Dome’ missile defense system (built with the U.S.) that renders rockets fired from Gaza ineffectual, the hugely asymmetrical ‘kill ratio’ of

Palestinians to Israelis slaughtered and the conspicuous targeting of civilian houses, schools, hospitals and critical infrastructure by Israel. Conversely, if Israel's bombardment is precise and those killed are overwhelmingly civilians then civilians are the precise targets of Israeli bombs. Israel's strategy is clearly a war of attrition: slaughter a captive civilian population to force repudiation of their democratically elected political representatives without addressing the circumstances that led to the choice of Hamas over more 'palatable' (to Israel) political leadership. The implicit choice from the election is that Palestinian capitulation to the Israeli siege and occupation is not an option.

The reason for keeping solid focus on the U.S. in what can be more narrowly explained as a regional (or even 'internal' if you assume away the history of Palestine) conflict is that Israel's capacity to act as 'it' does toward the Palestinians and across the Middle East depends upon the might of the U.S. military to back it up. This is to grant that narrower explanations have descriptive power but to aggressively reject the eternal slander that opposition to Israel's state policies derives from nationalist / religionist differences rather than as stated— objection to Israel's state policies. The U.S. provides Israel with the arms, intelligence and military support that facilitate siege, occupation, irresolution of political difference and a hardening antipathy that is as socially destructive as it is unjust. And the history of the U.S. acting as dishonest broker in Israeli-Palestinian 'negotiations' (always on the side of Israel) combined with the use of Israel as regional proxy for U.S. 'interests' places the plight of the Palestinians in an international context. Without the U.S. (and Britain and France) in the picture negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians would proceed from a wholly different set of premises.

The relevance here of the U.S. 'experience' in Iran (1953 – 1979) is that installation of a puppet dictator (the 'Shah') was preferred to direct instigation of regional chaos. Likewise the U.S. (CIA) installed Saddam Hussein in Iraq until he was 'uninstalled' in the recent U.S. war. When considered with (George W) Bush's catastrophe in Iraq and his apparent sincerely held, if only superficially considered, belief in the possibility of creating 'democracy' across the Middle East, it would seem that American stupidity and arrogance are at least as likely an explanation for widespread chaos as some well-conceived plot to prevent competing interests from arising (the theorized goal of planned chaos). This is no doubt a roundabout way of backing into the contention that in addition to being outright evil Israeli treatment of the Palestinians is shortsighted bordering on radically self-destructive. Tying Israel's future to the Jeb Bush / Hillary Clinton / John McCain / Lindsey Graham school of foreign policy is certainly a nod in the direction of human folly.

The intractability of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict lies with Israel and the U.S. If the goal of war of attrition is to affect a political outcome then that political outcome has to be possible or it isn't an outcome, it is a slaughter. Today Nicaragua is relatively stable while other 'beneficiaries' of American 'largesse' in Central America— Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala, are gangster states so violent and corrupt that their children are willing to risk being treated as criminals in the U.S. for the chance to live a little while longer. The Nicaraguan people waited for U.S. proxies to stop murdering them and then rejected direct American governance. The Palestinian people have no such option. The election of Hamas can only be seen as destructive to Palestinian interests if there was a better option. The Israeli and American view is that if siege and occupation don't force fealty then adding slaughter and wholesale destruction will accomplish this goal. At this

point Israel's war of attrition against the Palestinian people is evident for what it has always been, thinly veiled code for racist genocide.