

# **THE LONG ROAD TO GAZA**

**BY URI WELTMANN**

Practically everywhere around the globe, it is not possible to read the newspapers or watch the news without witnessing – either briefly or at great detail – the human tragedy in Gaza. The unjust war launched by the Israeli government of Benjamin Netanyahu, has resulted in vast destruction in one of the most densely populated areas in the world, at a great cost of lives. The people in Israel, in whose name the government has waged this military campaign, also fell victim to its policies and are expected not only to endure the hardships of war, but also to pay for its economic price, once the dust settles.

This article, since it was written as the aggression was still unfolding, does not aim to be a full reportage of the war, nor a study into its spiraling death toll. Instead, I will attempt to contextualize the recent war on Gaza, to describe some of the events that occurred in the months preceding it, and to lay out the political motivations behind the Israeli government's decision to launch it. Carl von Clausewitz's famous saying that war is a continuation of politics by other means, suggests that for a finer understanding of this war, one has to have a grasp of the developments leading up to it.

When writing history, the choice of the starting point is a highly political choice, one that might set a perspective for the whole account of events. I will choose to begin the «Long Road to Gaza» around a year before the war broke out, when after a few years of Netanyahu's refusal to sit down at the negotiating table, he nonetheless found himself doing this very thing.

## **Domestic and foreign public opinion forces talks**

After a long period of time in which no negotiations were held between Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), it was announced on 30 July 2013, that the talks will be resumed under US auspices. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu went to these talks unwillingly, as he is a staunch supporter of the idea that the occupation can be «managed», rather than ended. But eventually he had to succumb to the pressures, both from inside Israel and from abroad.

Among the internal pressures was the fact that the majority of Israelis voted in the January 2013 elections to parties who are committed – in words, although not necessarily in deeds – to the idea of «Two States for Two Peoples». A public opinion poll conducted in July 2013 showed that 59% of Israelis supported resuming the negotiations and 55% supported the creation of a Palestinian state alongside the State of Israel.<sup>1</sup>

As for the external pressures, these included the European Commission guidelines which stated that every private Israeli entity that wants EU funding must show prove, it has no links to the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) of West Bank and East Jerusalem, nor to the Occupied Syrian Golan Heights.<sup>2</sup> Also, the EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton announced, she is seeking to draft comprehensive regulations about labeling Israeli products that are manufactured in the settlements in the OPT.<sup>3</sup> Of special importance was the Horizon 2020 scientific cooperation agreement between Israel and the EU, the signing of which was delayed because of the European Union's insistence that no companies or institutions which are based beyond the internationally recognized «Green Line» border will be able to benefit from the agreement.<sup>4</sup>

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1 The poll was conducted by «Panel Politics» institute, and published on 22.7.2013 at Mako news website: <http://tinyurl.com/mako220713> (Hebrew)

2 Published in the Official Journal of the European Union, 19.7.2013: <http://tinyurl.com/EU190713> (English)

3 «Catherine Ashton: Israeli settlement products to be labeled in EU by end of 2013», Haaretz, 23.7.2013: <http://tinyurl.com/haaretz230713> (English)

4 «Israel's National Security Council to discuss EU cooperation in wake of settlement boycott», Haaretz, 5.8.2013:

## Negotiating while deepening the occupation

As a result of these internal and external pressures, Netanyahu found himself in the uncomfortable position in which his government was forced into negotiations it was not willing to see through. From the very beginning, he was keen to create facts on the ground – most notably constructing new housing units in the settlements – that will bring the negotiations to a halt. His aim was to win the blame game: to create conditions which would force Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) to be the one that calls off the negotiations, thus enabling Netanyahu – with US backing – to declare that the Palestinians are responsible for the collapse of the talks, rather than his own hawkish and expansionist government.

During the nine months of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations (from August 2013 to April 2014), the Netanyahu government promoted plans and tenders for at least 13,581 new housing units in the settlements, an average of 50 units per day. The average yearly number of tenders was four times higher compared to previous years.<sup>5</sup>

According to a special report by the Negotiations Affairs Department of the PLO, 61 Palestinians died due to the actions of Israeli armed forces during these nine months, and 1054 were injured by Israeli military and security officials. During the period of negotiations, there were 660 settler attacks on Palestinian civilians and property, without the Israeli occupation forces acting to prevent these from happening, and often with their tacit or open support. These attacks included stone-throwing, burning and uprooting of olive trees, destruction of cars, and vandalizing mosques and churches. While the settlements were being expanded, the Israeli authorities also continued to target houses of Palestinians. 508 Palestinian structures were demolished, and 878 persons were forcibly expelled. During this period, Israel conducted 4500 military raids and arrested 3674 Palestinians.<sup>6</sup>

These actions rendered quite ridiculous the Israeli government's claim that it is negotiating towards a peaceful resolution of the conflict. If it is indeed serious about drawing up a border between Israel and Palestine, then why is it creating facts on the ground, through settlement expansion, that would alter these very borders? And if it is serious about seeking an agreed-upon arrangement in Jerusalem, why is it forcing Palestinians out of their homes in the occupied Eastern Jerusalem, while at the same time bringing in new Israeli settlers? This policy amounts to holding discussions about how to divide a cake between two partners, while simultaneously eating the cake.

## Hawkish government which opposes the «Two State Solution»

This apparent contradiction can be solved by realizing that the right-wing Israeli government has very little intention on reaching an agreement with the Palestinians. This can be understood not only by observing its actions, but also from hearing what the Israeli political leaders were actually saying during this period.

Netanyahu's coalition partner, the hard-line Minister of Economy, Naftali Bennett, head of the extremist «Jewish Home» (Bayit Jehudi) party, said in closed conversations that «the goal is to torpedo any agreement and prevent deterioration to pre-1967 lines».<sup>7</sup> Housing Minister Uri Ariel – no. 2 in the «Jewish Home» party – said that «there will be just one state between the Jordan River and the sea, and that is the State of Israel. Jerusalem will not be divided again. There are no [construction] freezes and there will be no more freezes – we won't allow it».<sup>8</sup>

These rejectionist voices can be heard not only among Netanyahu's coalition partners, but also in his own Likud party. Minister of Defense Moshe Ya'alon said on Israeli TV Channel 2 that Abu Mazen «is not a partner for a final accord that ends with the recognition of the State of Israel».<sup>9</sup>

Thus, rather than using the nine months period of negotiations as an opportunity to constructively advance

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<http://tinyurl.com/haaretz050813> (English)

5 «9 Months of Talks, 9 Months of Settlement Development», a report by «Peace Now» movement, 29.4.2014:

<http://tinyurl.com/peacenow290414> (English)

6 «Israeli Violations During the Nine Months Negotiation Process», Special Report by NAD-PLO, 29.4.2014:

<http://tinyurl.com/plo290414> (English)

7 «Bennett says his goal is to 'torpedo' any agreement with the Palestinians», The Jerusalem Post, 20.1.2014:

<http://tinyurl.com/jpost200114> (English)

8 «Housing minister: No more settlement freezes», The Times of Israel, 28.5.2014: <http://tinyurl.com/toi280514> (English)

9 «Ya'alon: Abbas is a partner that receives, not one that gives», Ynet, 15.3.2014: <http://tinyurl.com/ynet150314> (English)

a viable solution which would secure both the legitimate national rights of the Palestinian people as well as the safety and security of the people in Israel, the right-wing government of Israel was stalling and buying time, waiting for the inevitable collapse of the talks. In October 2013, the London-based *Al-Hayat* newspaper quoted Western diplomatic sources, who said that the talks between Israel and the Palestinians have reached a dead-end «because of Israel's refusal to engage in serious negotiations about borders». The newspaper quoted Palestinian sources as saying that «the prospects of achieving progress in the current talks are zero», and said that the Palestinians fear that Israel may use the meetings between Netanyahu and Abbas to «promote an imaginary peace process and avoid international pressure».<sup>10</sup>

### **The US government is not a neutral mediator**

While the Israeli-Palestinian talks were held with the intimate participation of US Secretary of State John Kerry, he is by no means a neutral mediator. The State of Israel is the largest recipient of US assistance, and in 2009-2018 it is scheduled to receive \$30 billion worth of military aid.<sup>11</sup> It is a strategic ally of US plans in the region and will play a key role in any future war in the Middle East, be it against Syria or Iran, designed to secure US interests.

That is the reason why the Obama administration has continued, rather than departed from, the policies of all previous US administrations and turned a blind eye towards the expansionist policies of Israel in the OPT. The annexation of Palestinian lands and the forced expulsion of people from their homes is a small price to pay in order to secure the strategic alliance between the world's biggest superpower and its most loyal subcontractor in the Middle East.

Indeed, it came as no surprise that in an interview with the Israeli TV Channel 2, Kerry had hinted that evacuation of Israeli settlers from the West Bank may not be necessary.<sup>12</sup> Knowing well that the settlement project comprises the spearhead of the occupation and stands in violation of international law, he had nonetheless chosen to de-facto stand by the Israeli position that the settlements will remain in place.

The basic attitude of the US government vis-à-vis the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations had aroused criticism among Palestinian left parties, which claimed that Kerry's proposals aim to «liquidate the question of Palestine and prolong the Israeli occupation».<sup>13</sup> The course of events has also confirmed the assertion of the Communist Party of Israel, that US patronage over the negotiations means that the objective conditions which are needed for the talks to succeed are not being met.<sup>14</sup>

### **Talks collapse over the question of Palestinian prisoners**

After the Palestinian outcry regarding the continuing construction of new housing units in the settlements has fallen on deaf ears, the talks eventually collapsed around the question of Palestinian prisoners. At the time, 5,053 Palestinian prisoners and so-called «security detainees» were held in Israeli prisons, many of them for long periods of time without any due trial.<sup>15</sup>

One of the commitments made by Israel at the start of the negotiations was the release of 104 Palestinian prisoners, in four different batches. For the most part, the Israeli government had stood by this commitment and released the first three batches of prisoners, despite heavy criticism from the most right-wing elements in the ruling coalition (and also, surprisingly, from the dovish opposition Meretz party<sup>16</sup>).

But as the nine months of negotiations were nearing their end, and since the Israeli government an-

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10 «Report: Israel has caused peace talks to reach a dead-end», The Jerusalem Post, 1.10.2013: <http://tinyurl.com/jpost011013> (English)

11 «Obama approves aid to Israel, PA», Ynet, 18.12.2009: <http://tinyurl.com/ynet181209> (English)

12 «Kerry hints settlers might not be evacuated as part of deal», The Times of Israel, 19.2.2014: <http://tinyurl.com/toi190214> (English)

13 «Leftists hold rallies across West Bank rejecting negotiations», Ma'an News Agency, 25.1.2014: <http://tinyurl.com/maan250114> (English)

14 «No chance for peace without ending the settlements», Zo HaDerekh, 28.8.2013: <http://tinyurl.com/zohaderekh280813> (Hebrew)

15 «Statistics on Palestinians in the custody of the Israeli security forces», B'Tselem - The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories: <http://tinyurl.com/btselem070714> (English)

16 Member of Knesset (The Israeli Parliament) Nitzan Horowitz: «I am deeply opposed to release of terrorists at this time», 29.12.2013: <http://tinyurl.com/meretz291213> (Hebrew)

nounced that it is not willing to release the fourth batch of prisoners, Palestinian President Abu Mazen has decided to take measures into his own hands and ask for the Palestinian Authority (PA) to become a signatory to 15 international conventions, including the Geneva Convention. Palestinian Foreign Minister Riyad Maliki said that the move was a response to Israel's failure to carry out the fourth stage of a prisoners' release to which it committed as the negotiations opened. Israel's decision not to follow through with its end of the deal has prompted the Palestinians to feel freed from their own promise not to appeal to international institutions.<sup>17</sup>

Amos Harel, the military commentator for *Haaretz* daily newspaper, acknowledged that although Netanyahu was trying to place responsibility on Abu Mazen, it is clear what set events in motion: «Since the Palestinian Authority surprised Israel and the United States with the announcement that it was applying to join 15 international covenants, senior Israeli officials have accused the Palestinian leadership of irresponsible behavior and endangering stability in the region. [...] Inside the negotiating room [...] the Palestinians were warned [...] that Israel could impose sanctions against the PA if it continues with the international process. [...] The Israeli worries cannot cover up the basic fact: It was Israel, not the PA that violated the earlier agreements on the negotiations. At the end of March, Israel was supposed to release the fourth and last batch of Palestinian prisoners, the remaining 26 out of 104 prisoners scheduled to be released in terms of the agreement from July 2013. The minute Israel did not keep its commitment and ignored the schedule, the Palestinians saw themselves as free to respond. Given all this, they didn't exactly break all the agreements.»<sup>18</sup>

### **Netanyahu takes heat as events unfold**

The collapse of the talks between Israel and the PLO was followed by two developments, both of which were threatening to Netanyahu's policy of continuing the occupation and delaying the possibility of a peaceful solution: the formation of the Palestinian National Consensus Government and the hunger strike by Palestinian prisoners.

After reconciliation agreement was reached in April between the two leading Palestinian political parties, Fatah and Hamas, a new Palestinian government was formed, which enjoyed the backing of both the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and the Hamas-led government in Gaza. Israel announced it would not negotiate any peace deal with it and would push for punitive measures, but the new National Consensus Government was recognized by the international community, including the United States and the European Union. Netanyahu accused that «Abu Mazen said 'yes' to terrorism and 'no' to peace. This is a direct continuation of his policy of refusing peace».<sup>19</sup> The Palestinian president responded that «Israel's threatening messages show the real intentions of the occupation. We don't want an escalation, but we cannot stand idly by.»<sup>20</sup>

In the past, Netanyahu has made the claim that negotiations with Abu Mazen are futile, since he does not speak for the 1.8 million Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, who are under a Hamas government, but only for the 2.7 million Palestinians in the West Bank. Now, after the Palestinian National Consensus Government was formed, a new excuse was made: negotiations with Abu Mazen are once again futile, this time because Hamas is a terrorist organization and therefore is excluded from all possible talks! These rhetorical twists and turns help expose once more the rejectionist policies of the current Israeli government that is bent on junking the negotiations altogether, in order to maintain the occupation and prevent the possibility of an independent Palestinian state.

The second development which was politically threatening to Netanyahu was the fact that Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails launched a hunger strike on April 24<sup>th</sup>. In the beginning, the hunger strike was limited to the so-called «security detainees» or «administrative detainees» who are arrested without trial, in a manner which is in violation of international law. But it spread to other prisoners, drawing the attention of the

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17 «Palestinians submit official bid to join 15 international conventions», *Haaretz*, 2.4.2014; <http://tinyurl.com/haaretz020414> (English)

18 «Both Israel and the Palestinians are between Kerry and a hard place», *Haaretz*, 4.4.2014; <http://tinyurl.com/haaretz040414> (English)

19 «Israel to hold Abbas 'directly responsible' for Gaza terror», *The Jewish Press*, 3.6.2014;

<http://www.jewishpress.com/news/breaking-news/israel-to-hold-abbas-directly-responsible-for-terrorism-from-gaza/2014/06/03/> (English).

20 «Palestinians form consensus government», *Al-Jazeera*, 3.6.2014; <http://tinyurl.com/aljazeera030614> (English)

world. Eventually, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Ban Ki Moon, was forced to voice his concerns regarding the deteriorating health of the Palestinian administrative detainees.<sup>21</sup>

Confronted with these two developments, Netanyahu was facing political pressure as international public opinion was dissatisfied with his policies. Not only was he not willing to answer the plea of the prisoners, but he was taking the blame for the collapse of the peace talks and for his refusal to negotiate with the National Consensus Government. He badly needed an opportunity to turn the tables around.

## The kidnapping

On June 12<sup>th</sup>, three Israeli teenagers – Eyal Ifrach, Gilad Shaar and Naftali Frenkel – who were living in the settlements went missing near Hebron, deep in the occupied West Bank. An abrupt phone call made by one of the teens to the police suggested that they were kidnapped by Palestinians. The Israeli government responded with accusing Hamas as being responsible for the kidnapping and launching «Operation Brother's Keeper», in search of the three teenagers. Large military forces were mobilized in the West Bank, resulting in hundreds of Palestinians arrested, including children, and at least 5 Palestinians killed. Among those arrested were Hamas members of the Palestinian Legislative Council and also Palestinians from various political parties who were previously released in the October 2011 prisoner exchange deal.<sup>22</sup>

During the 11 days of the operation, there were accusations leveled against Israel that it was committing collective punishment, as it was making mass arrests and detentions and placing entire towns and villages under closure. For throughout this operation, Hamas had denied it had any role in the kidnapping. Abu Mazen has also maintained that no proof of Hamas involvement was presented. He added that the kidnapping is «not justified and not accepted».<sup>23</sup> Despite these statements, Netanyahu has continued to claim «undeniable evidence» for Hamas responsibility, although he didn't make this evidence public.

Against the backdrop of the heavy oppression in the West Bank, the international community was no longer concerned with the issues that caused Netanyahu to lose sleep just weeks before that. The Palestinian prisoners' hunger strike, now almost forgotten, ended in June 25<sup>th</sup> without any real achievements. The world powers were no longer concerned with the failure of the nine months of negotiations nor with Israel's refusal to recognize the Palestinian National Consensus Government. Foreign governments limited their discourse to denunciations of the gross violations of human rights that the Israeli army was committing as part of its operation in the West Bank, or to expressions of concern over the lives of the three kidnapped teens.

On June 30<sup>th</sup>, the dead bodies of the three Israeli teens were found near Hebron. Shortly afterwards, the government released the recording of the phone call one of the teens made to the police, just as they were kidnapped. In the recording gunfire shots are clearly heard, raising question like: Why did Netanyahu claim they were kidnapped rather than murdered? Why did he assure the Israeli public that they are assumed to be alive? The cynical move by Netanyahu, who manipulated the general concern for the lives of the three teenagers into backing a massive military campaign against Hamas, is further emphasized by the fact that the Israeli police spokesperson Mickey Rosenfeld later admitted that the kidnappings did not occur on the orders of, or with the knowledge of the Hamas leadership, and that the crime was the action of a «lone cell».<sup>24</sup>

## «Hamas is responsible, and Hamas will pay»

Netanyahu accused Hamas of killing the three teenagers giving his war drive a strong momentum amongst a grief stricken Israeli public opinion. Moreover, ever since the kidnapping, Israeli far-right groups took advantage of the growing nationalist sentiments, and many violent acts occurred towards Arab citizens of Israel as well as towards Palestinians in the OPT. On July 2<sup>nd</sup>, a 16-year-old Palestinian from occupied East

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21 «Ban concerned at reports of worsening health of Palestinian detainees on hunger strike», UN News Centre: <http://tinyurl.com/un060614> (English)

22 «Israel committed serious violations in West Bank operations», Al-Ahram, 3.7.2014: <http://tinyurl.com/alahram030714> (English)

23 «Abbas says no evidence shows Hamas is behind kidnapping of three Israeli teens», Xinhua, 22.6.2014: <http://tinyurl.com/xinhua220614> (English)

24 «It Turns Out Hamas May Not Have Kidnapped and Killed the 3 Israeli Teens After All», New York Magazine, 25.7.2014: <http://tinyurl.com/nymag250714> (English)

Jerusalem, Mohammed Abu Khdeir, was kidnapped and burned alive by Israeli racist extremists, who considered this an act of retribution. The horrendous crime has sparked fierce riots in East Jerusalem, which spread elsewhere.

The clashes grew, and militants from the «Islamic Jihad» group in Gaza Strip were increasingly firing rockets at Israel stating their opposition to the mass arrests in the West Bank. The Israeli government – which conducted over 80 airstrikes in Gaza since the kidnapping occurred<sup>25</sup> – escalated by announcing «Operation Protective Edge» on July 8<sup>th</sup> and launching massive airstrikes and artillery. The situation aggravated as the Israeli army launched a ground offensive on July 17<sup>th</sup>, leading to numerous lives lost, to people wounded and displaced from their homes, and to massive destruction of houses and infrastructure. Until the beginning of August, the Gaza death toll rose to more than 1,800 lives. According to UN reports, 77% of those killed were civilians, many of them children and women. More than 60 Israeli soldiers have died, as well as three civilians<sup>26</sup>.

### **Peace, not war, will bring security**

Israel has attacked Gaza numerous times in the past decade: «Operation Rainbow» (May 2004), «Operation Days of Penitence» (September 2004), «Operation Summer Rains» (June 2006), «Operation Autumn Clouds» (October 2006), «Operation Hot Winter» (February 2008), «Operation Cast Lead» (December 2008), «Operation Pillar of Defense» (November 2012), and now – «Operation Protective Edge».

A hundred years ago, in August 1914, the British author H.G. Wells wrote of the First World War that it is «the war to end all wars». Looking back at the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, his statement is lamentable. But what then can be said of Netanyahu who sells to the Israeli public the defective goods of a military operation in Gaza to end all military operations in Gaza? It seems that even after eight military operations in the last decade, the Israeli political establishment had still not learned that without a lasting peace with the Palestinians, based on respecting the rights of both peoples, the end of every «successful» military operation is merely the creation of conditions for the next operation.

Only a just peace can assure an end to this vicious circle of violence. Such a peace will be based on establishing an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel, in the June 4th 1967 Green Line border, with East Jerusalem as its capital; dismantling all the Israeli settlements and the Separation Wall; release of all Palestinian prisoners held inside Israeli jails; and a just solution to the problem of Palestinian refugees according to UN resolutions.

The Israeli peace camp has been struggling for a diplomatic settlement of the conflict for decades and continued to do so even during the recent escalation. Demonstrations took place in major cities in Israel where protestors chanted «Jews and Arabs refuse to be enemies!» and «In Gaza and in Sderot – children want to live!» In Rabin Square, at the center of Tel-Aviv, many thousands have gathered on July 26<sup>th</sup> for a remarkably optimistic Jewish-Arab peace protest that was held despite physical attacks by right-wing thugs and interference from the police.

Like previous rounds of bloodletting, this recent brutal attack on Gaza will come to an end facing Israel with the choice: either to continue to do what has failed in the past and to prepare once again for another war within a year or two; or to embark on the road towards an agreement with the Palestinian leadership. The Israeli Left is determined to struggle for our country to take this second course and to advance towards a just and viable peace.

*Uri Weltmann serves on the Executive Board of the Emil Touma Institute for Palestinian and Israeli Studies, and is member of the Secretariat of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Israel.*

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25 «Israel bombs Gaza after rocket attacks, Hamas gunman killed», Reuters, 29.6.2014: <http://tinyurl.com/reuters290614> (English)

26 «Updated account of casualties since the beginning of the military operation», Siha Mekomit, 3.8.2014: <http://tinyurl.com/mekomit030814> (Hebrew)