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# After the Flotilla of Blood: No More Excuses for Israel

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Israel's attempt to divert argument away from its blockade on Gaza, and over to the resistance that its troops encountered while attacking the Blue Marmara, is futile and grotesque. Let's suppose for a moment that its commandos were attacked, as Israel claims, while invading this ship in the Freedom Flotilla. Here you have soldiers sent to prevent civilians from breaking a siege, while there you have 1.5 million Palestinians caught in a three-year humanitarian catastrophe.

The siege is justified, Israel claims, because Hamas holds its soldier, Gilad Shalit, under conditions that violate international law. Most of the world does not accept this excuse. What is more, the European Union and others cast doubt on the blockade's effectiveness, claiming that it merely deepens Palestinian suffering and strengthens Hamas.

International public opinion views the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict as the result of sheer stubbornness on the part of Israel, which isn't ready to pay the price of peace namely, an end to the occupation and recognition of the Palestinian people's right to a sovereign state. Israel is a victim indeed but of its own refusal. The long-lived Zionist consensus, which views the Land of Israel as the exclusive inheritance of the Jewish people, has victimized the Palestinian people. In its suffering, this people has become the banner of the international community across the political spectrum on the left among lovers of freedom, people of peace and fighters for human rights, and, unfortunately, on the right, among anti-Semites and fundamentalists.

Within Israel, ever since the breakdown of the Camp David talks ten years ago, discourse between right and left, between the proponents and opponents of the occupation, has been limited by mutual agreement that there is no partner for peace. This view was reinforced when Hamas took control of Gaza in June 2007.

Hamas, for its part, demands the lifting of the siege and the recognition of its government. These are its immediate strategic goals. It works to achieve them by every possible means, from rocketing Israel (which provoked Operation Cast Lead) to the current flotilla of aid ships. Opposed to Hamas is the Palestinian Authority under President Abu Mazen and Prime Minister Salam Fayyad. The PA's success is measured on a zero-sum basis against that of Hamas. The two are engaged in a dispute concerning relations with Israel.

Hamas demands an end to negotiations with Israel and the continuation of struggle, including the use of arms. The removal of the Gaza blockade will signal to Palestinians that the Hamas approach is right; it will deliver a lethal blow to the credibility of Fatah. Israel, one would think, should therefore be interested in helping the PA against Hamas. Here, however, we see how deeply refusal runs in Israel's veins. The absolute unwillingness of its government to make progress in negotiations and talk about core issues borders, refugees and the status of Jerusalem leaves the PA helpless, bolstering Hamas.

The siege of Gaza also has a regional dimension. It strengthens Hamas' allies in the Middle East, above all Iran, while drastically weakening the status of the US. It creates public opinion that is hostile to American soldiers in Afghanistan and Iraq, and it hinders the Obama administration from creating enough governmental stability to enable American withdrawal. As for Washington's friends in the region, from Egypt to Jordan and Saudi Arabia, they bear

the burden of the pressure exerted by the radical Islamic axis. In this way, the resolution of the Israel-Palestine conflict had become a strategic American interest.

Until now Israel has refused to cooperate with Obama. Its prime minister, Binyamin Netanyahu, waits patiently for the US mid-term elections in November, hoping that the Democrats will lose their congressional majority and that Obama will be weakened. The severe cracks in the historical relationship between Israel and America have paved the way for Turkey an old-new player to enter the arena. Since the election of Recep Tayyip Erdo an, who represents the Islamic Movement, and since the non-admission of Turkey to the European Union, this country has distanced itself from the West, building on alliances with its neighbors: Iran, Syria and other Arab states. Gaza serves as an entry ticket for Erdo an's Turkey into the heart of Arab public opinion.

In the demonstrations launched by Hamas to support the flotilla activists, Erdo an's picture was raised aloft, and not by chance. Most of the funding for the "Flotilla to Free Gaza" came from a Turkish Islamic charity that supports his political party. Thus the Gaza siege creates a new regional conflict between two important American allies, Israel and Turkey. Like its other friends in the region, the Turks face Washington with a hard choice: Israel or us!

In an effort to reconcile these allies, the Obama administration is brokering a deal that might ease tensions by accepting, to some extent, the Turkish demands: immediate release of the detainees (already done), the establishment of an investigative committee, and the lifting of the siege on Gaza. Israel is studying these demands with the utmost seriousness, because it fears for its strategic relations with Turkey and wants to avert another Goldstone Report.

In addition, for a long time now, Obama has been pressing Netanyahu to change the composition of his government and get free of his right-wing partners. Washington wants to see him heading a new coalition based on the Likud, Kadima and Labor. There is little doubt that Obama will now exploit Israel's international crisis to push for a change in its policy. The current right-wing coalition, featuring racist Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman, has lost its legitimacy in the eyes of the world. If Netanyahu cannot extricate Israel from the international blockade it has brought on itself, the country will be faced with another external inquiry like Goldstone's, as well as demands that it ratify the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, not to mention a widening boycott of its universities and products.

The failure of Operation "Spirits from Heaven," from the macho school of Defense Minister Ehud Barak, brings nearer the day of radical political change in Israel, which may result in new elections. Here, however, a note of caution is needed: a new government will still be center-right no recipe for a solution. Israel has known many governments of Labor, Likud and also Kadima. All failed the reality test. All avoided confronting the settlers, All entered negotiations with the PA as a mere delaying tactic to soften criticism from the West.

One big question hovers in the air: how far will the American president go in his attempt to resolve the conflict? Until now Obama has supported the siege on Gaza, imposed Salam Fayyad as Palestinian prime minister, and perpetuated the appointment of Lieutenant General Keith Dayton as high commissioner, in effect, of the Palestinian police, who serve the security interests of Israel. At the same time, Obama remains fuzzy on the nature of prospective Palestinian sovereignty, the future of Jerusalem, and the refugee question.

As long as Washington avoids saying unequivocally that it supports the establishment of a sovereign Palestinian state within the borders of June 1967, all Obama's efforts, including the attempt to change the composition of Israel's government, will remain fruitless, and the region will continue to deteriorate. The present dispute with Turkey, following the flotilla of blood, shows how slippery is the slope down which we slide.

The Middle East is divided today between fundamentalist regimes and dictatorial pro-American regimes. Between

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these stones its peoples are ground. Utterly missing in the public discourse are the oppression and poverty from which the workers are suffering whether in Egypt, where they demonstrate for a raise in the minimum wage, lifting loaves of bread before the parliament of Hosni Mubarak; or in Iran, where they struggle against privatization and joblessness under Ahmadinejad. In Turkey also the workers have gone to the streets in recent months against privatization and unemployment. The workers of the Middle East do not have a party to represent them. Their voice is not heard.

Israel too can hardly be said to seek the good of its citizens. Jews and Arabs alike suffer here from a gloves-off capitalist regime, which discriminates against workers and tramples their rights. The occupation sharpens the suffering of both peoples. In recent years the number of those who are both employed and poor has grown. Among households with one breadwinner, 36% were beneath the poverty line in 2008/9.

Solidarity between Jewish and Arab workers is the only way to overcome the cycle of bloodshed. The supreme interest of the workers on both sides of the conflict is to build a political and social alternative, egalitarian and humane, against a right-wing Zionist chauvinism and an Islamic fundamentalism that are leading both peoples into catastrophe.

*Post-scriptum :*

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