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Interview with Gilbert Achcar from Irish Left Review

Behind the Gaza Crisis

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The interview was conducted by Daniel Flynn on the 10th of January 2009.

Daniel Finn: What do you think are the chief goals of Israeli strategy at present in their assault on the Gaza strip?

Gilbert Achcar: Well that's a complicated question actually, because there are different levels involved. Seen through a wide angle, it is part of an ongoing struggle between Israel on the one hand and both Hamas and Hezbollah on the other, a struggle which reached a previous peak in 2006, when during the summer Israel was simultaneously waging a war against Gaza and another one, a major onslaught, on Lebanon. That was related to the global strategy of the Bush administration in its confrontation with Iran, with the conception prevailing in Washington that Hamas and Hezbollah are tools of the Iranian state and therefore part of an alliance of forces that should be smashed if ever US hegemony in the region as well as Israeli security is to be stabilized. It is therefore a further stage in the same ongoing war that has been unfolding for the last few years.

[https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/gaza_child_killed.jpg]

Photo: STWC

Now if we narrow the focus, the fact that this has been launched at this very moment, starting on the 27 of December, is of course related to shorter term political considerations: on the one hand, the Bush Administration will soon be out of the scene and although the Israeli government have no real reason to fear a major change in US policy in the Middle East, if we judge from all the signs given by the Obama team, there remains the prospect that the new Administration will get into talks with Iran, as Obama said he would during the electoral campaign. In that case, US backing for a tough stance in the confrontation with Iran might be diluted. Taking that into consideration, one reason why the campaign is being launched right now is in order to spare the next administration the need to cope from the beginning with a major crisis in the Middle East, so there was relief in the Obama team that this is done under Bush.

The problem is that the operation went on much longer than expected, as is now a recurrent pattern in Israel's aggressions: bygone indeed are the days of the 'Six-Day War'. Ideally for the Israeli government-and there were a lot of comments about this possibility some months ago-there should have been a strike against Iran itself before the Bush administration left the scene. However, that became impossible for a number of reasons related to the deep trouble in which the Bush administration finds itself: not only the general political weakness of a lame-duck president, but also the economic crisis, which makes any kind of military confrontation with Iran at this point something that would certainly be harmful to the interest of the global economy [this interview was conducted before the revelation by The New York Times of the rejection by the Bush administration of a recent request by Israel of a green light for airstrikes on Iran's nuclear facilities]. Instead of these strikes against Iran that it was wishing for, Israel is attacking Hamas which it sees as a proxy for Iran.

And then there are even narrower perspectives involved which are the electoral considerations in Israel. As you know, new Israeli elections are to be held soon, and parties represented in the Israeli coalition government-Olmert and Livni's Kadima on the one hand and Ehud Barak's Labour party on the other-are facing strong competition from Likud, the far right wing of the mainstream Zionist scene in Israel. In a sense this onslaught on Gaza is a way to preempt the outbidding on which Netanyahu would certainly have built his electoral campaign. So if you put all these issues into consideration you get an overdetermination, i.e. a multiplicity of reasons for this operation to be launched right now. All the rest, the rockets launched by Hamas and all that, are just pretexts, in the same way that the

abduction of 2 soldiers by Hezbollah in July 2006 was but a pretext used by Israel to launch a premeditated full-scale aggression.

Daniel Finn: The last major round of confrontation between Israel and Hamas and Hezbollah in 2006 ended in a major setback for the Israeli state and all kinds of recriminations among the political and military elites. Do you think Israel now has a realistic chance of overturning that setback and talking up a victory, or does it face another defeat?

Gilbert Achcar: Well, here lies the reason why the situation is extremely dangerous and worrying right now. Think about it: this onslaught has started on the 27th of Dec so that means we are some 2 weeks into the fighting and you have already a heavier death toll in absolute numbers than what you had in Lebanon after the first two weeks of intensive bombing. And if you take it in relative numbers, knowing that the Lebanese population is close to 3 times larger than the population of Gaza, then it is much, much more. What is very worrying and dangerous about the present situation is precisely that, because of the previous fiasco in Lebanon in the summer of 2006, Israel cannot afford another fiasco of the same kind. They cannot afford a new one, for both strategic reasons and opportunistic or short-term ones, small fry political calculations, that is.

On the one hand the Israeli state stands to lose a lot of its so-called military credibility if it faces a new fiasco, all the more so that the enemy they are facing this time, i.e. Hamas in Gaza, is certainly much weaker than what Hezbollah is and was in Lebanon. Hezbollah is certainly stronger in the Lebanese Shiite community than Hamas is in Gaza where you have a bitter contest between Hamas and the PA/Fatah, and you have a few other groups competing for the same constituency. Beyond that, of course, for very obvious reasons, Hezbollah had much more weapons than Hamas has in Gaza, which is a small strip of land surrounded from all parts and under heavy surveillance. They can smuggle some light weapons, not major weapons into Gaza whereas in Lebanon, Hezbollah could build up an important arsenal - all the more easily that it was done with Syria's backing.

So if Israel gets into a second fiasco even against Hamas which is quite weaker than Hezbollah, then this will be seen necessarily as a major disaster, worse than the 2006 one for Israel. Not to mention, and this is the second point, the petty consideration. If the ruling coalition in Israel comes out from the present war with another fiasco, its parties won't even need to go to elections. Netanyahu would stand to smash them completely and they know that. So they cannot afford a fiasco for these two reasons combined and this is what makes the situation very, very worrying. They might develop the syndrome of the wounded beast, getting more ferocious than they are already. The level of Israeli atrocity is increasing war after war. The 33-Day War in 2006 was already the most brutal aggression in the long history of Israeli wars, the most brutal utilization of power by Israel, carpet-bombing whole regions of Lebanon, civilian areas.

The pretext then as now is that fighters are hiding among the population. This is the most hypocritical argument: what do they want them to do, to regroup in some wasteland with signposts saying 'Bomb us here'? This is preposterous. The truth is that Israel is trying to crush mass political parties, which are armed, of course, but they have to be armed because they are permanently under threat. These are armed popular movements. Most of their armed members are not professional fighters living in barracks. When you take all these aspects of the problem into consideration, there are very, very serious grounds for the mounting, increasing worries that are expressed by international humanitarian agencies.

A lot of people now sense that the population of Gaza is really under threat of massive extermination. This is not the usual kind of exaggeration, it is a sober assessment when you face such a level of violence and brutality, day after day, with more and more so-called accidents in which concentrations of civilians are targeted with mass-murder as a result. The only alternative to a fiasco for Israel is to push forward its ground offensive in the populated areas. The worst-case scenario becomes therefore quite possible, and that would mean thousands and thousands of people killed, not to mention the maimed and wounded, and that is absolutely frightening.

Daniel Finn: If Hamas is going to be seen as a victor even a partial victor coming out of this latest confrontation with Israel, what does it have to do? Is it enough for Hamas to survive? Do they just have to keep standing?

Gilbert Achcar: If Hamas manages to come out of this war standing up, that is. Due to the geographical conditions, they have already suffered a certainly higher proportional rate of casualties in their ranks than Hezbollah did in 2006. The day when Israeli bombing started, the very first day, if you remember, it targeted buildings of the Hamas security force, and the death toll was immediately very heavy. But if at the level of leadership and basic structure they manage to come out preserving more or less their existence without giving any major concession or, let's say, no major concession that is not reciprocated like, 'We stop firing rockets but we get guarantees that you, Israel, stop shooting at us and stop embargoing us, strangulating us'-if they come out of this war with a deal of this kind, this would mean an Israeli fiasco and this would be seen for them as a political victory in the same way that Hezbollah achieved one in 2006.

But right now at the time we are speaking, this is purely hypothetical because we cannot predict how things will evolve. What is actually clear is that at the regional level, if not at the world level, this Israeli onslaught has increased tremendously the popularity of Hamas. We cannot take it for granted, however, that the same applies to the Palestinians in Gaza precisely because of this competition between Hamas and Fatah. On this there are mixed reports. Of course, Fatah supporters will say 'Hamas have put us in this terrible situation, we are suffering because of them; of course Israel is the first to blame, but...', this same 'but' that we have heard from some Arab regimes. This is what the Egyptian government, which is very obviously in collusion with this Israeli onslaught, expressed from the very start, and that is what we heard here and there from Arab allies of the United States, the same rhetoric we heard in 2006, the same blame that was put on Hezbollah for Israel's onslaught on Lebanon. The final political outcome for Hamas remains to be seen. It is, I think, too early now to make any assessment for what it will be in the long run or even in the medium term. For the time being, as I said, the only certain thing is for Hamas at the regional level an increasing popularity, which is the almost automatic outcome that you get every time Israel singles out an Arab target and starts striking at it. The target becomes automatically popular because of the hatred for Israel and its permanent aggression in the region: any victim of Israel, and especially any force resisting Israel, is sure of achieving popularity in the region.

Daniel Finn: There has been talk over the last week of a certain amount of discontent among a younger generation of Fatah. There have been reports that Marwan Barghouti has sent messages from his prison cell critical of the statements made by Mahmoud Abbas. Do you think that is likely to take on any substantial form with the current leadership of Fatah being undermined; do you think there's any chance of the Fatah leadership changing course?

Gilbert Achcar: Barghouti is in a sense a reserve card for Fatah. Mahmoud Abbas has already burnt his cards to a great degree. He doesn't have any credibility anymore, but appears as a servile man, a secondary pawn in this regional game. He is not popular even within Fatah, so it is clear that Fatah will be in need of another leading figure immediately or very soon, and Barghouti would be an alternative. But since he is in jail, his fate much depends on Israel-and on Washington, to be sure. Now, to know how Barghouti would behave if ever he was liberated from jail is hard to tell. The main problem is what kind of relation he would have with the US and their number one Palestinian stooge Muhammad Dahlan. Dahlan and Barghouti were in electoral alliance in the January 2006 election. Does it mean that they will maintain a collaboration and form a cohesive dominant team in the post-Abbas Fatah, or will they be in competition? It remains to be seen.

Daniel Finn: As you said the Egyptian regime in particular and to a greater or lesser extent also all of the pro-US Arab regimes, have been seen as complicit with Israel particularly the Mubarak government. If there is further escalation, if Israel behaves, as you described it, like a wounded animal, using more and more brutal methods against the Palestinians living in Gaza, how difficult is it going to prove for the Egyptian government to be able to contain anger among its own people, which already seems to be very substantial.

Gilbert Achcar: Well, they are not only seen as complicit. They are actually complicit with Israel: They were told about the onslaught before it started and this was reported in the press. The day the onslaught started, the Arabic daily published in London, Al-Quds al-Arabi, ran an article by their correspondent in the West Bank explaining that Israeli foreign minister Tzipi Livni, who had been in Cairo the day before, had told the Egyptian authorities that Israel was going to launch an operation against Hamas. General Suleiman, the head of Egyptian intelligence, asked her that Israel targets specifically Hamas fighters and takes care to spare civilians. Well on the same day the article came out the onslaught started, and it started by targeting police barracks in Gaza. So on the face of it, it was an onslaught sparing civilians and specifically targeting armed forces. This proves beyond a shadow of a doubt that they were told that this would happen and they did not even tell Hamas, which was taken by surprise when the onslaught started, hence the initial heavy death toll in the ranks of its armed forces.

The Egyptian government and other pro-US Arab regimes wish very much for a weakened Hamas. They are not for wiping out Hamas, as they know that it would entail a huge and traumatizing human cost, if it were possible at all. They would like a weakened Hamas that would have no choice then but to sever its links with Iran and be obliged to depend on them for its survival: This is what they wish. They want a tamed Hamas and therefore look for Israel to do the taming. So Israel has to teach Hamas a lesson and then Egypt and, behind Egypt, the Saudis and the Jordanians will say to Hamas: ‘Look, you have no other choice but to cooperate with us; either you join the game under our conditions and sever all links with Iran and Syria, or you will have to face Israel alone and the possibility that it crushes you’.

Now if the Israeli operation backfires, they will turn coats immediately, of course, by pure opportunism. They will turn coats and start bashing Israel and multiply statements of condemnation, which don't go very far. The Egyptian regime could upgrade its disagreement with Israel on the issue of international troops on the Egyptian side of the border with Gaza, which Cairo is rejecting and Israel is demanding. There are issues of this kind which could be blown out of proportion, allowing Cairo and fellow Arab regimes to pretend that they do confront Israel, but in a responsible way because they know Israeli military strength and care for the welfare of the people and therefore they are not like those crazy guys of Hamas, etc. This is their kind of hypocritical discourse.

Daniel Finn: Hezbollah organized some very substantial rallies in Lebanon in solidarity with Hamas and in solidarity with the people of Gaza. Is their support likely to remain political or is there any prospect, as some people have speculated in rather alarmist terms, that Hezbollah might open a second front against Israel on the Northern border.

Gilbert Achcar: I don't think there is any prospect of this kind. It seems that the 3 rockets fired from Lebanon into Northern Israel yesterday were launched by one of the small Palestinian groups linked to Damascus. Hezbollah immediately denied any responsibility and the Lebanese coalition government where Hezbollah is represented condemned unanimously the firing of these rockets. The reality, at this stage, is that you have huge demonstrations and manifestations of political solidarity, but Hezbollah have also drawn the lesson from 2006. If you remember after the 33-Day War in 2006, the Secretary General of Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah, said in an interview that had he known that Israel would react the way it reacted to the abduction of its two soldiers on the 12th of July, Hezbollah wouldn't have done it. He was meaning: ‘Had I known that they would destroy my country and kill 1500 of my people, I wouldn't have given them a pretext for that’. This is what he meant, addressing human feelings.

At the same time we know that for Israel the abduction was but a pretext: had no soldiers been abducted Israel would have found-or created-whatever pretext in order to do what they tried to do at that time. Hezbollah accepted UN Security Council Resolution 1701, which meant deployment not only of Lebanese troops to Southern Lebanon but also international forces, the UNIFIL, although this is not exactly in the interest of Hezbollah since these forces are heavily composed of NATO forces and are therefore a potential threat to Hezbollah itself. They had to accept them nevertheless because the alternative was to carry on with that horrible war and there were human limits on that level. Hezbollah cannot therefore take what would appear to be a completely irresponsible initiative in opening a second front-especially if it gets no green light for that from both Damascus and Tehran.

On the other hand, how can one expect the Lebanese to open a second front, when the Palestinians on the West Bank themselves, including Hamas, are not opening one: Hamas did not fire rockets from the West Bank. This by the way shows how serious an error was Hamas's decision to seize full power in Gaza alone, thus separating the two Palestinian territories. Not that they should not have preempted the coup that Dahlan was busy organizing against them with US and Israeli backing, but they should not have wiped out all Fatah presence in PA institutions as they did. Whereas the strategic need is for the struggle to be built on a pan-regional level, the Palestinian scene itself has been fragmented into two segments. This is a pity.

These events also bring into discussion the whole issue of the strategic choices of weapons. Hamas is resisting heroically, no doubt, but we cannot compare the conditions in Lebanon with the conditions in Palestine. During the years when you had the Israeli occupation of Lebanon, Hezbollah was waging a war of attrition against the occupation, concentrating mainly in Lebanese areas against occupying forces. It even reached with the occupier in April 1996, through US mediation, an agreement which stipulated that: 'Armed groups in Lebanon will not carry out attacks by Katyusha rockets or by any kind of weapon into Israel. Israel and those cooperating with it will not fire any kind of weapon at civilians or civilian targets in Lebanon. Beyond this, the two parties commit to ensuring that under no circumstances will civilians be the target of attack and that civilian populated areas and industrial and electrical installations will not be used as launching grounds for attacks'. The geographical nature of the Lebanese terrain and the presence of Israeli forces in Lebanese populated areas made a strategy of popular resistance possible, and this triumphed eventually with Israel evacuating Southern Lebanon in what looked like a debacle in 2000.

In the case of Gaza however, Israeli troops had withdrawn from the interior of the Strip and were encircling it. It doesn't make much sense strategically to confront them militarily by launching rockets into populated areas in Southern Israel. The point is that from the point of view of the Palestinian occupied territories, if you drew up a balance-sheet of the Palestinian struggle against the Israeli state since 1967, it is very clear that the peak efficiency of the Palestinian struggle was reached in 1988 with the so-called Revolution of the Stones, the first Intifada, without firearms, suicide bombing, rockets, anything of the kind- just mass mobilization. This is what was most terrible for Israel: it put the Israelis in terrible political difficulty.

There is a lesson to be drawn here. These are matters of strategic understanding which not all forces in the region are sufficiently taking into consideration. There is today a lot of religious-inspired maximalism in the Palestinian struggle, as there was yesterday nationalist-inspired maximalism, but hardly any realistic assessment of the conditions in designing a strategy. Not a strategy of capitulation in the name of 'realism', of course, like that of the PLO-I mean the PA, Arafat and now Mahmoud Abbas-but a strategy of resistance and liberation, of popular resistance to impose on Israel whatever strategic goal is feasible in the present condition. And what remains possible in the prevailing objective conditions is to get Israel to withdraw from the 1967 occupied territories, with the possibility for these territories to organize their own government democratically, to enjoy at least political sovereignty-which is not the case presently when you see how Israel and its Western backers reacted to Hamas's electoral victory.

Beyond this immediate goal, the only sensible long term strategy has to involve a disruption in the Israeli society itself. It cannot be designed as purely from without Israeli society as have been both the PLO's strategy and that of Hamas. There is no possibility to defeat Israel militarily from without: no possibility in conventional terms because its weaponry is much stronger than all surrounding Arab states, not to mention the fact that no part of this environment is willing to confront Israel-not only Egypt and Jordan, but Syria too. A 'popular war' for the liberation of the whole of historical Palestine does not make sense, because Israelis are the overwhelming majority in the pre-1967 territory. This is not like an occupying army, whether the US in Vietnam or Afghanistan or Iraq, or Israel in Lebanon. Beyond that, everyone knows that Israel is a nuclear power since the late 1960s. Any thinking built on destroying the Israeli state from without is therefore irrational, in all senses of the term.

So aside from the requisites of internationalism, i.e. the kind of victory over the Zionist state that is desirable, there is no sensible strategy to defeat it anyway that does not take in account the necessity for a major disruption within

Israeli society itself, with a major faction of Israeli society actively opposing the bellicose policies of the Israeli government and fighting for a lasting peaceful settlement based on justice, self-determination and an end to all kinds of discrimination. This is a major, hugely important prerequisite. That is why the Intifada in 1988 was so important: It created a real, deep crisis within Israeli society.

But what we are seeing now is a very high degree of cohesion and unanimity among the Israelis in the most ferocious, severe and brutal aggression of their history and that is something which bodes ill. In such conditions even when you get fiascos like the one in 2006, what do they produce? Not a break of major chunks of the Israeli population away from its government's policy, let alone with Zionism, and their turning antiwar like major portions of the German population in the First World War or the US population during the Vietnam War, but what you get are rather further shifts to the right. That is why the whole picture is very gloomy in the region because, as I said, if this offensive ends in a fiasco, which is what we wish, we know in advance that this means Netanyahu, who is even worse than the present guys. Where all this will end is very difficult to see.

Daniel Finn: It does appear to be a very dangerous time for the Palestinians and perhaps as dangerous a time that it has faced since 1967. There's talk in Israel media circles, in establishment circles, about handing over the Gaza strip to Egyptian authority, handing over populated areas of the West Bank to Jordan. And if that plan or something similar was put into practice, that would surely be fatal for Palestinian national aspirations for many years to come. What steps do you think could be taken by forces within Palestinian society to improve the prospects of the national movement?

Gilbert Achcar: I don't really see things as you described them. First of all, the Jordanian monarchy itself would be rather scared today if it had to resume control of the West Bank. When this was a real prospect, it had already taken into account the rising militancy of the Palestinians, which is why the plans designed by previous King Hussein were federative in nature, that is, plans giving the West Bank, or the West Bank and Gaza, some degree of self-government. But the problem now is that the Jordanian monarchy cannot rely on the likes of Mahmoud Abbas to tame the Palestinian population. They know that they are facing a very radicalized population and that a new junction, a new merge between the Palestinians on the West Bank and Palestinians in Jordan, where they already constitute a majority of the population, would be very dangerous for the Jordanian monarchy. That's the problem.

A renewed merge of the West bank with Jordan would definitely be in the interest of the Palestinians because the so-called independent state in the West Bank and Gaza does not make sense. This is where I fully agree with those who criticize the two-state solution: A so-called independent state does not make sense in the West Bank, if it is to be held hostage between Israel and Jordan as vice and hammer. Therefore the Palestinian people need the necessary breathing space and outlet provided by Jordan, not to mention the human and familial continuities between the two banks of the River Jordan. There is a natural historical unity of human community between the two banks and for that community to be able to exert self-determination you need a different kind of government in Jordan, a really democratic one and not one where the majority of the population are oppressed by a regime that stirs up ethnical divisions of a tribal nature, as is the case right now.

This is why I don't think that the prospect of a renewed merging of the two banks is one that the Jordanian government is enthusiastic for, or even actively considering. In 1988 King Hussein officially severed the links between his kingdom and the West Bank: Why did he do so? Very simply because in 1988 you had the Intifada in full swing and he understood that the kind of West Bank that the monarchy ruled over since the deal that his father cut with the Zionists in 1948-the West Bank that his monarchy was able to rule more or less without major trouble until 1967 and that came under Israeli occupation afterwards-had become unmanageable in light of the Intifada. It became a hot potato: too dangerous to handle, and that is why he severed the links officially and abandoned any claims for the West Bank.

Daniel Finn: Do you think the Palestinian political stage is likely to remain the property of Hamas and Fatah for the foreseeable future, or do you think that some of the marginal forces at present have any chance of establishing themselves to a greater extent?

Gilbert Achcar: Well I don't really see any such prospect presently. I mean, there are no real challengers for the time being to the two major actors, which are Fatah and Hamas. Other existing forces, especially the Palestinian left, lost credibility throughout the years, after having lost so many opportunities. So one cannot expect a sudden miraculous development, unless some new force arises, which we haven't heard of yet and which would take some time to mature anyway. What you will have under the present conditions are further evolutions from within the two polar forces in Palestinian society-a struggle between different factions within Fatah, and the same for Hamas. Neither of these two forces, because they are big forces and have mass constituencies and memberships, is monolithic. Changes from within them are presently more likely than any unexpected rise of new forces from without.

Now that being said, I wish very strongly that a third force could rise, one which would be a progressive movement based on the left wing tradition that exists among the Palestinians and that is far from being negligible, even in Gaza, although it is not strong enough to be a counterweight to Fatah or Hamas. I wish very much that some Palestinian left-wing force could emerge as a real major player on the scene. But to be frank, for the time being, aside from hope or wish, this is not a realistic prospect, we don't see any premise for that.

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