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Palestine's Unfolding Horror

— an interview with Hisham Ahmed

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Suzi Weissman spoke with professor Hisham Ahmed, in the midst of the catastrophe in Gaza and the Israeli-Occupied West Bank, for the July 25, 2014 broadcast of her program “Beneath the Surface” on Pacifica radio KPFK in Los Angeles. We have abridged the interview for *Against the Current*. Obviously the numbers of casualties and other specifics have changed — very much for the worse — in the meantime. Thanks to Meleiza Figueroa for transcribing the discussion.[ATC]

Suzi Weissman: Welcome to “Beneath the Surface,” I’m Suzi Weissman — and today we’re going straight to the West Bank to speak to Hisham Ahmed. He is a colleague of mine at St Mary’s College, and the chair of the Department of Politics there. He is formerly from Birzeit University and right now he’s in the West Bank with his family.

The crisis in Gaza has spilled over to the West Bank, where at least six Palestinians have been killed. Many more have been wounded in the last 24 hours. Yesterday somewhere between 20,000 and 50,000 — we’ll ask Hisham for exact numbers, as far as he can tell — marched from Ramallah to Jerusalem in a Day of Rage over the military carnage in Gaza, which included the bombing of a UN school where many had taken refuge.

International public opinion is moving against Israel, although in the United States it remains divided. Hisham is joining us to discuss the situation, including the underlying causes and possible impact on the political prospects for the future of Hamas and Israel.

Let’s start with yesterday’s demonstration, and also the bombing of the UN shelter in Gaza. What you can tell us about exactly what’s going on right now?

Hisham Ahmed: Obviously, the situation, especially in Gaza, is quite catastrophic. Indeed, yesterday there was heavy bombing of a United Nations (UNRWA) school. At this school, there were thousands of Palestinians who tried to escape from the bombing when their houses were completely destroyed by Israeli F-16s. These people thought, unfortunately mistakenly, that they would be safe at this UNRWA school.

This school should have immunity in any society in any country. But as they were there, and as they were about to be transported to another school that UNRWA employees thought might be safer, several bombs were dropped at the school, killing 16 people and injuring tens of Palestinians.

It’s a catastrophic situation, Suzi, in Gaza, because the death toll now stands at about 860 people. [This was before a temporary cease-fire during which bodies were recovered from collapsed buildings, bringing the numbers of dead to more than 1000 at that point — ed.]

In Gaza there are about 1.8 million people. The injured have reached about 6,000, and you can definitely do the math: in proportional terms that would be equivalent to some 15 million Americans being wounded in a matter of a couple of weeks.

Tens of houses were destroyed completely while people were living there. Most of the killed are children and women, all unarmed civilians. When you see hundreds of thousands of people trying to escape the bombing, it does remind Palestinians of the 1948 Nakba, the Catastrophe, where they were left homeless and stateless. The scenes are

horrific. There is an act of genocide that the Occupation is committing in Gaza.

We have been trying to account actually for some relatives and been constantly on the phone; unfortunately we haven't been able to reach them. Such is the case for almost every Palestinian family, because Palestinians have been dispersed as refugees in the West Bank, in Gaza, in Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, all over — so you might find one family split into more than one location. This is the case with us, and unfortunately we haven't been able to account for relatives and friends that we know in Gaza.

As you accurately mentioned, the situation in Gaza has spilled over onto the West Bank; this is to be expected. Today six Palestinians were killed, and several were injured. Yesterday there was a peaceful march coming from Ramallah, with the participation of over 40,000 people. The occupation army opened fire at the demonstrators, killing a couple of them and injuring about 200 Palestinians.

This is one of the most difficult moments, I think, for Palestinians; it really makes them feel that they are completely forgotten and neglected by the international community. Israel does act as if it is above the law, as if it has total sanction by the United States unfortunately; it is violating international law, humanitarian law, committing acts of genocide. And in the final analysis this hurts Palestinians most directly, but at the same time, it does deform Israeli society, especially when it sees its army flexing its muscles mainly at unarmed civilians.

The Background

SW: This situation has divided public opinion in the United States in a way that I can hardly remember since the invasion of Lebanon in 1982 but perhaps much more now. The newspapers, just talking about coverage here, are telling stories — for example, that the worst call that you can get is that in 10 minutes the Israeli military is informing you that your house is going to be bombed, and in 10 minutes you can hardly gather much more than yourself.

But on the other hand here, people will be able to say “at least they warned you.” And there’s all kinds of fairly ugly repetition of Golda Meir’s famous statement that the Palestinians, or the Arabs. are “forcing us to kill their children.” Can you comment on that?

HA: I arrived here around the middle of June, and it was very clear from the very first moment that the Israeli occupation was preparing itself for spilling Palestinian blood.

First, they fabricated the story of the three settlers [teenagers whose kidnap and killing was instantly blamed on Hamas — ed.] The Israeli army deployed literally thousands of troops, invading Palestinian villages and camps, ostensibly searching for the three [whom the Israeli government almost immediately knew were dead — ed.].

Usually whenever there are settlers or an Israeli soldier captured, a Palestinian party, faction or organization would claim responsibility for it, and announce publicly that they are behind it — there are political ends to be achieved, mainly exchange of Palestinian prisoners. Such was not the case.

The Israeli occupation was really preparing for an all-out assault on Palestinians. They arrested many leaders, many members of the Palestinian Parliament — mainly from Hamas, but not exclusively. At any rate, immediately thereafter, the Israeli army launched a number of attacks on Gaza, setting off this carnage.

Now, there is nothing more precious for Palestinians than life, a dignified life. What Palestinians have really been struggling for is simple: their freedom, and independence. One can really get the picture when they see Palestinian families completely wiped out; tens of Palestinian families are completely wiped out because of the bombing.

I think what the Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu, and his foreign minister Lieberman — who are the most extreme — calculated that this is an opportune moment regionally and internationally to lash out at Palestinians. Gaza has been under siege for over eight years now. There is a government in Egypt, headed by Sisi, which is anti-Palestinian, which has tightened the noose around the neck of the Palestinian people by closing the only outlet out of Gaza, the Rafah checkpoint. So Netanyahu thought that this would be a good moment indeed to “teach the Palestinians a lesson.”

Netanyahu has nothing to offer; to get out of the embarrassment of the failed negotiations that Kerry has led for the past several months, I believe, Netanyahu wanted to set up a whole new set of events, mainly by launching attacks at Palestinians.

The conventional wisdom has always been that Israeli warplanes would fly over Gaza, drop bombs, kill people for a couple of weeks, and then they would stop, while maintaining the siege and the blockade around Gaza.

This time, Netanyahu was right in the sense that regionally, this was a good moment for him to attack, but he was completely wrong in the sense that if you push any people into the corner, as is the case in the Gaza Strip, they're bound to try to defend themselves. And therefore there are some casualties now amongst Israelis.

Support for Hamas

Hamas has lost much of its popularity before this attack — and you know quite well, Suzi, that I am well-known to be a critic ideologically and politically of Hamas — but I can really tell you with utmost certainty that what Netanyahu has done, among other things, is to revitalize the popularity of Hamas in an unprecedented manner.

SW: If it is the case that Hamas (and you're an expert on Hamas) was flagging in its popularity, and that as a result of this very lopsided assault on Gaza and on Hamas, it has raised support for Hamas — speculate, if you would, on what the political endgame in mind may have been. What can you see of Israeli public opinion in regard to this assault?

HA: Let me address the second point first. Israeli public opinion right now is almost unified in support of the Israeli army and the Israeli government. This is usually the case; it's similar as a matter of fact to the U.S. public during wartime, they rally around the effort.

But once the carnage really begins, once the snow begins to melt, that is when Israelis start questioning the strategy of the government, the efficacy of the policy used. I believe that this is coming really really soon, especially when it will become clear that the Israeli government has failed in achieving all of its objectives, not just some of them.

Rather than weakening Hamas, rather than weakening any radicalized tendencies, they are boosting the radicalization, not just in Palestinian society but in the region as a whole. There are rallies and demonstrations by Arab people all over the Arab world, even against the tight grip of the dictatorial governments.

Within a short time I think we will see an incredible uproar from Israeli public opinion vis-a-vis the mismanagement and miscalculation by their government. While it is quite risky to make any prediction about political arrangements

and composition, I would venture to say — I repeat, I would venture to say — that this attack represents the beginning of the demise of Netanyahu's political life.

That all he has done is kill children and women is really the picture that's coming out for everybody in the world. European capitals are flooded with demonstrators against Israeli occupation actions. Israel is going to face more isolation in the world. The whole effort to introduce more boycotts and sanctions against Israeli products and industries, I think, is on the rise.

The Forgotten of the Forgotten

SW: What's the Israeli endgame? How could they possibly imagine any sort of political gain in the future from this? Or is there really no concern that once Netanyahu's out of office, it's somebody else's problem?

HA: All that Netanyahu has done is to introduce military solutions to what is a political problem. I think it's really a repeat of his egoistic, idiosyncratic personality. Netanyahu is the kind of person who tells a lie, and ends up believing in this lie and acting upon it. I believe he is not living reality in any way whatsoever.

This is a political problem that requires a profound political solution. Even the United States, as supportive as it is of the Israeli occupation, now realizes that you cannot keep an entire people under blockade and under siege forever, and expect them to remain passive.

Gaza is not the forgotten place of the world; it's the forgotten of the forgotten places in the world. It is the most densely populated place on the face of the earth. It's the largest human prison on this planet. And therefore people in Gaza have had it. They believe that life and death have become synonymous. And hence they have tried, with the little means that they have at their disposal, to defend themselves.

Of course, there is no match between what they have and what the Israeli power has; it's an asymmetrical conflict. Israel has the fourth strongest army in the world, with a tremendous arsenal not just of conventional weapons, but also of non-conventional weapons. And it's flexing its muscle on one of the weakest spots in the world. For Netanyahu to fail even in doing that, I think, will come to haunt him very, very soon.

As you know, the situation is tense, it's hot — Israelis in particular are really focused on the conflict — but I have every reason to believe that the post-war, post-aggression phase will be completely different from the pre-aggression phase.

This attack has reshuffled all the pieces on the table for Palestinians and Israelis. No longer will the Israeli military be able, I believe, to think of launching attacks on Palestinians without being impacted themselves. The Ben Gurion airport, for example, was practically shut down for four days.

We just now got news reports that the Netanyahu government, the Security Cabinet, has flatly and unequivocally rejected the ceasefire proposal advanced by Kerry. We are likely to see more bloodshed unfortunately, in the days to come, but sooner or later this conflict will have to end.

What Palestinians are determined to do is that they want it to end now, because they are the ones who are paying the price, they are the main victims of this conflict, they are the David vs. Goliath; but they want it to end by lifting the blockade. People want to be able to live in relative freedom, with dignity, with humanity. It is really sad to see that the Israeli army continues to bomb, continues to destroy, while the world is immovable — at least on the official,

governmental level.

The popular level is completely different. People are protesting all over the world. People do see that Israel indeed has come to pose as a main disturber to international peace and stability. But governments — whether in Britain, or the United States, or France — still haven't really seen the extent of the horror, the terror, brought upon Palestinians.

Political Aftershocks

SW: Would you speculate on what the future is for Abu Mazen (Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas — ed.) and Hamas? Will a new political configuration come out of this? Does it strengthen one or the other?

You mentioned that you've been a long critic of Hamas and belonged to the secular opposition. Are worse forces in the wings, as you've intimated before, or does that no longer pertain? What's the possibility of reigniting a kind of Arab Spring?

HA: I think it's one of the most important questions that need to be raised. One of the main casualties of this conflict is the political current and tendency that Abu Mazen-Mahmoud Abbas, the head of the Palestinian Authority, represents.

To begin with, people were quite skeptical of his ability to deliver on any peace talks and negotiations even before this attack. But once this attack happened, and once Palestinians saw that there is another force — i.e. Hamas and some other resistance groups that are somewhat able to send a message to the Israelis that they are not about to submit, not willing to acquiesce, refusing to surrender — I think that has weakened Abu Mazen, especially in the West Bank.

I saw this here on the ground; even supporters of Abu Mazen became absolutely skeptical of his ability, and of what he represents, and became more sympathetic and empathetic with Hamas. Therefore, yes, actually now Hamas has managed to acquire tremendous support within Palestinian public opinion, even among some previously not sympathetic with Hamas.

That's number one. But number two, and what I have been really warning all along, if no accommodation, no political settlement at least to end this carnage is arrived at with Hamas, I have every reason to believe — and I wish Israeli strategists would hear what I am saying — I have every reason to believe that the seeds for more fanaticism will be planted. We might see tendencies that are a lot more rigid than Hamas.

The region should teach us some lessons. When we think of ISIS, for example, and the tendency they represent, they can have a spillover effect easily onto Palestinian society — which I hope we would never see. But this is all dependent on the kind of settlement, on the kind of ceasefire arrangement that can be done now.

If I were in the shoes of the Israelis and the Israeli strategists, as much as they might despise Hamas, as much as they would hate Hamas and would not want to do any deals with it, believe this is the most rational thing to do now: End the carnage right away, stop the killing of Palestinian children, let people live a dignified life with the siege lifted.

Introduce or allow the introduction of serious, credible programs and projects of reconstruction, social and economic

development in Gaza, simply to give people a spark of hope. Despair leads people to radicalization and extremism. The whole world should stand up to the Israeli government to tell them that enough is enough, because that won't be confined to the Palestinian-Israeli situation.

We're talking about a small geographic area between Gaza and Tel Aviv; it's less than 120 km (i.e. about 80 miles), a very short distance. That leads me to say that in this geographic area, either all are safe, stable and peaceful, or in my view none will be safe, stable or peaceful.

I think it is time for any Israeli leader to realize that the destiny of the Israeli public is organically linked to the destiny of the Palestinian people. And seeing it any other way is shortsighted, destructive, and lacking any perspicacious thinking.

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