

# Dick Platkin's Reports from Be'er Sheva

*Dick Platkin is a member of LA Jews for Peace who is spending three months in Israel*

Thursday, January 15, 2009

Rochelle and I are collaborating on something for her professional colleagues, some of whom have swallowed the Israeli self-defense line hook, line, and sinker. It will also be directed at many of the American Jews we know, and others, who don't realize what a moral and strategic low point this is for Israel.

Even if Israel had not committed war crimes, they still have made strategic blunders. Unless they reoccupy Gaza, Hamas or some other resistance group will emerge when the fighting stops, while Israel will have reduced its outside supporters to just the US, a crumbling empire whose economy is cratering and which is as obtuse as Israel is in not realizing that when you attack people, they don't like you. I can already visualize hundreds of thousands of Gazans on the street with green Hamas flags the day after the fighting stops.

Plus one of the common Israeli assessments for this attack on Gaza being a success is that the military has had so few casualties. Somehow this analysis misses two obvious points. The first is that just as many Israelis have died in the past three weeks from the Gaza attack, as died in the previous 7 years: 11 vs. 10. Second, Palestinians have died at a ratio of about 100:1 so far, and only the most committed racists could overlook this number in counting casualties. Furthermore, around half of those killed in Gaza had nothing to do with fighting. They were just the wrong people in the wrong place: huddling in their houses or taking refuge in a school!

Today, when we drove from Be'er Sheva to the Rehovot area, where we stay with Rochelle's friends on weekends, we saw a large plume of smoke of the horizon. I think it was the UNRWA building which Israel dropped white phosphorous bombs on today with the rationale that a rocket was launched from the area. Or it could have been the Gaza media building or the hospital which were also bombed or shelled today?

Then we got to the moshav, Israeli TV had lots of coverage about Hamas rockets fired into parts of Israel adjacent to the Gaza strip, but hardly anything from Gaza itself.

So, the situation is grim, and when the fighting stops, it may be even worse. The racist yahoos here in Israel will do well in the election, and the peace forces, which have had many anti-war rallies around the country, will be in retreat, among both Arabs and Jews.

With right-wing nut jobs gaining even more influence on both sides, who knows what further horrors are around the corner?

[From Anita Steiner, Chair of Rabbis for Human Rights, Ashkelon.](#)

Thursday, January 15, 2009 8:29 AM

The rockets continue to fall in Israel. Thus far today, Ashkelon has been quiet. Oops, as I am writing there was a siren, but I didn't hear a boom. Yesterday there were 3. Since the beginning of this war over 90 rockets have hit Ashkelon. Each time we hear a siren we go to our safe place. We have between 15-30 seconds to get there. As I have said over and over, Israelis have places to flee to. Many of us have miklatim-bomb shelters/ fortified rooms. Our home command has good guidelines, that if you are able to follow them, you should be protected. But 60% of the citizens of Ashkelon have no safe place. It is especially difficult for older folks, people with disabilities, and families with young children. There are over 40 bomb shelters here in Ashkelon, where residents are living 24/7. A friend of mine is in charge of them. Davka the towns and cities

are extremely well organized. We have learned from the recent war in Lebanon. Also many people are staying with friends, relatives and even strangers in other parts of the country. Schools and kindergartens have been closed since the beginning. Only some 12th graders have gone back to school here in order to prepare for their matriculation exams, but they are studying in bomb shelters or fortified rooms. Most small businesses are in horrid shape, even if they are open.

But I have been talking about our side.

Gazans have no where to turn to, no where to flee. We may have dropped leaflets and called people saying that we were going to bomb them, but where could they go to?

About 80,000 people are now homeless since we bombed their homes and neighborhoods or threatened to. Half of these are kids.

The war continues and continues in Gaza. It seems like we may have hit one of the hospitals in Gaza today. Several days ago we hit an UNWRA school where many refugees had sought shelter. The death toll keeps mounting, as do the wounded and obviously shell shocked people on both sides of the border.

The Israeli authorities and human rights groups disagree about the exact numbers, but between two thirds and a fourth of the Gazans killed have been civilians and of those perhaps a third have been children.

Even months ago, if people had wanted to flee Gaza, they couldn't because we sealed the borders, that is the border crossings, by sea and by air.

The humanitarian situation there is horrendous. For a few hours a day, we have been allowing humanitarian aid to get through. But we hadn't been allowing fuel to cross, which effects the supply of electricity, which disrupts the flow of clean water, and proper maintenance of the sewage system. And we haven't allowed their wounded to be evacuated.

Most Israelis are only concerned with the Israeli side of the conflict. But thank goodness, there are those who are sympathetic to crisis to the civilians in Gaza. But few do anything. Who is listening to the cries of the children in Gaza?

Israel has not let foreign journalists into Gaza. One of the few English TV reporting that comes out of Gaza, is Al Jazeera English. ( By the way, Al Jazeera English can not be viewed on US TV. But some can be seen on the internet.)

The result being is that Israelis only see what our government wants them to see. This is sad in a democracy.

You may disagree with me, you may not want to hear what I am saying, but you can't accuse me of not supporting Israel. This is my home. I may be in the opposition, but as Rabbis for Human Rights says: We want Israel to live up to its ideals. We want Israel to be a light unto the nations.

Personally, Natani's unit - paratroopers - has been called up. And he has been near the fighting, but as far as I know, not in it. Just got a call a while ago that he has time off and was headed home to Tel Aviv. Gili, his partner is due with their first child, a daughter, in a few weeks. Each and every family in Israel is worried about its sons, fathers, brothers, relatives, friends, neighbors who is serving.

Any questions you may have, I would be happy to answer them, in between dodging rockets.

January 1-5, 2009

**The Local Situation:** Before heading off to Israel, I promised some reports on the situation here and in the directly and indirectly occupied territories, but did not know they would include

analyses of a massive Israeli military attack on Gaza, as well as some pitiful counter-attacks by unguided rockets on nearby Israeli cities, including Be'er Sheva, where we are staying.

So, to begin, we are safe, although it was quite an adrenalin rush to wake up to an air raid siren on Dec. 31, run to a bomb shelter, and then hear two explosions. But we then got out of the range of the katusha rockets, staying with friends near the Tel Aviv area for a few days. Life there is as totally normal as it could be, with just an occasional peek at Israeli television. LA, in 1992, was much scarier. Which restaurant to go to there is still the big question. We are now back and have had several more air raid sirens.

As far as I can tell, most Israelis accept the country's media's self-defense interpretation of events, although there are anti-"war" rallies and vigils barely covered in the local press. When the press mentions them, it mostly focuses on Israeli Arabs and Palestinians from the East Jerusalem or the West Bank demonstrating. Anti-war Israelis, who according to the polls make up about 10-20 percent of the (Jewish?) population, are nearly invisible in the Israeli media. Even the international media, which covers rallies all over the world, ignores them.

There are, however, some critical articles in the daily newspaper Ha'Aretz (translated from Hebrew into English since it also is published in English) and at least one critical columnist in the English language Jerusalem Post, a conservative newspaper. Not sure about the Hebrew language press, but I assume the anti-war liberal analysts are scattered there, too. There are, of course, some left wing journalists like Uri Avnery, but I think he would be treated here like Noam Chomsky is in the United States, forced to the margins at home while he is celebrated and widely published abroad.

**Real and Hidden Agendas:** As for agendas behind this so-called war, this is what I see:

First, it is really not a war at all. On one side Israel has a fully modern army with its own state of the art weaponry, as well as even better planes, missiles, bombs, etc. from the US and fully supported by both US political parties. The Palestinians, in contrast, are totally isolated on all sides in Gaza, and besides, have no credible offensive capability, and virtually no defensive capability, either. They have no anti-aircraft technology, such as radar, other detection systems, anti-aircraft missiles and artillery, etc. They also have no planes, tanks, troop carriers or any other hardware associated with modern warfare for the past two centuries. All they have are rifles, primitive homemade or WWII era Soviet rockets which were designed to be fired in a fuselage, not one at a time. One friend here, with lots of military experience, thought the historical military precedent for the Palestinians is the War of 1812, with bombs bursting in air. But, as Iraq and Afghanistan has demonstrated, modern armies, like Israel's, cannot do much in the long run in urban guerrilla warfare. In fact, Avraham Burg, former speaker of the Knesset wrote exactly this in Ha-Aretz yesterday. He also pointed out that Israel has not a clear military victory since 1967 and the US since WWII.

His point seems clear here since Israel has been struggling for 11 days to defeat military irregulars who have been under siege for nearly two years, while in 1967 Israel defeated three countries with modern armies in six days. So, the hidden Israeli agenda of reclaiming Israel's reputation as the regional military power to be feared by all can be chucked into the dustbin of history.

Second, Israel and the US clearly prefer the Palestinian Authority's President, Abu Mazen/Abbas and his party, Fatah, to the Islamic party Hamas, as their Palestinian junior

partners. This is why both Israel and the U.S. hope to not just stop rockets being fired on Israel (Sometimes I think they actually like an occasional rocket since it buttresses their “There is not we can talk to” position.), but to depose Hamas in the Gaza strip and keep 2

Abbas in power in the West Bank and perhaps adding Gaza to his jurisdiction. While the chance of doing this is minimal unless Israel invades and reoccupies the Gaza strip, this is their hope. It does seem rather far-fetched though because Abbas lost the last Palestinian election, and if he rides in on an Israeli tank, his stock falls below the horizon everywhere. What little power he could retain would just be through the force of direct and indirect US and Israeli arms. With friends like that, he really does not need any enemies. Even, if Israel finds an alternative to Abbas, a Palestinian equivalent of Karzai in Afghanistan, he could never win an election and would only rule through direct Israeli military power and indirect US military power working through Israel.

Third, the other factor is growing inter-imperialist rivalries in the Middle East. Iran is the supporter of Hezbollah in Lebanon and is said to support Hamas in Gaza, at least with cash and some primitive, antique weapons (unguided missiles with a range, at most, of about 25 miles). But, since Israel (and the US) could not defeat Hezbollah in Lebanon, and because Iran's influence continues to grow by default, both the Israel and the US hope that beating up on Hamas in Gaza will reduce the influence of Iran in the Middle East. Furthermore, Iran has growing relations with Russia and China, so their influence will also grow. Even the Europeans sense the long-term political outcome and have three separate peace missions moving around, with no effect, in the Middle East. But, they know which way the wind is blowing and don't want to be tied to the US and to Israel in the long run.

But, so far there is no evidence that any US or Israeli political gains are appearing. The US and Israeli governments cannot think dialectically and realize that their aggression against Gaza will strengthen Hamas and Iran. Even if Israel invades and temporarily occupies the Gaza strip, it has further isolated and discredited Abbas, itself, the US, and the pro-US/pro- Israel Arab regimes. If Israel somehow manages to topple Hamas, then every analysis I have read said either a Somalia-type war lord system or another Islamic Party, such as Al Qaeda, will rise from the ashes.

Furthermore, in the long run by appending itself to the US and corrupt Arab governments, Israel makes its strategy of colonization, occupation, and the relentless use of force against Palestinians a dead end street. Unless it finds a new patron, such as Russia, I just don't see how this approach can permanently prevail. Something will have to give.

Fourth, Israel has a short-tem tactical gain from this war by under-cutting the various peace plans feared by Israeli expansionists, which is most of this country's political parties. Even if they wanted to seriously pursue these peace plans, it would be hard for the incoming Obama administration to get any peace negotiations going, whether directly or through mediators such as Qatar, Turkey, or Egypt after Israel's attack on Gaza. The Saudi Plan, negotiations with Palestinians, negotiations with Syria, etc. are all dead or on the back burner now, so maybe this is the hawk's one achievement, even when they fail to stop the rockets or replace Hamas with Abbas. In fact, many analyses say the timing of the attack was designed to box in the Obama administration. While I doubt that the Israeli expansionists had any credible fear based on all evidence about Obama and his foreign policy team, they are taking no chances.

Fifth, meanwhile aid from the US government to the Israeli government will continue to flow, allowing the status quo to more or less continue, which means continued military attacks and

siege against Gaza and lower intensity pressure on the rest of the occupied areas, such as checkpoints, home demolitions, and death squads.

**Future offers two unstable alternatives.** As for the future, under the existing status quo, which means local, regional, and international capitalism, there are two likely alternatives.

1) Israel can stretch out the occupation, settlements, death squads, dispossession, home demolitions, bombings, and invasions as long as possible. But eventually, the crumbling US empire won't be there to make it possible. The U.S. will either make its aid to Israel conditional on something like the Saudi Peace Plan in order to establish a Pax Americana throughout the Middle East, or it will quickly fade after accelerated economic crises and 3

military defeats force the U.S. empire to quickly retrench. The slow quantitative decline of the US could become qualitative, and these changes would then come very quickly.

2) Israel can succumb to the two state solution, which means that most of the settlements would be removed and a Palestinian state, probably some variation of a bantustan, would be created. In this case, it will clearly have a neoliberal market economy and invite or be forced to accept private investment, mostly in labor intensive industries. This would force the Palestinian state to assure a competitive rate of return on foreign investment, which means beating up on unions, waving lots of flags, courting foreign threats (which should be easy in this part of the world), and skimming lots of money coming into or leaving the country while rival imperialists compete with each other to keep subordinate local elites in power.

This two state solution would also run into trouble with its outside supporters and its own working class when it could not guarantee a high rate of return or use nationalism to contain class struggle. Furthermore, there are several forces undercutting nationalism in this period. The nation state is already outliving in economic usefulness to capital, which is why regional formations are emerging, such as the EU and Mercosur in South America. And, cell phones, email, Internet, cable and satellite TV and radio, make the world much smaller and homogeneous, two developments which favor regionalism and internationalism and also undercut a two state solution in the long run.

So, either way, capitalist crises, in combination with class struggles at many levels from work sites to local states to great power rivalries are going to lead to great instability, and with the right political leadership, also to progressive social changes.

**What to do?** This is the time for all types of non-electoral politics, and I think the political objective needs to be to get the United States government, including both Bush and Obama, to stop their support for this war. As far as I can tell, the only open supporters of this invasion in the entire world are the two major US political parties, and they need to be sharply challenged. If any Obama supporters still hold illusions about him or his party, this is the time to wake up, smell the coffee, and take to the streets.

**Information sources:** Some of the best sources of information I have found on the War on Gaza are:

Ha'Aretz in English

AlJazeera TV in English. They have lots of articles on their website and you can also watch their programming through your computer, a necessity in the US (unlike Israel!), where the cable companies refuse to carry foreign news programs other than one hour of BBC news for America.

BBC World and France 24 also have some good reports, but to watch them in the US, you either need to stream them in a low resolution format through your computer or get a satellite dish, like Telstar 5, to avoid the censorship of the US cable providers.

Jewish Peace News

If you need one great book to read, I strongly recommend Jeff Halper's *An Israeli in Palestine*. Just published and very accessible and informative.

Much more to write about this deplorable situation in future installments. If you have questions or comments, please send them to me.