

GENERIC INVADER NONSENSE - OBAMA ON IRAQ

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As a presidential candidate, Barack Obama described the war in Iraq as one that "should never have been authorised and never been waged". (www.wsws.org/articles/2009/mar2009/pers-m02.shtml) On February 27, as president, Obama saw it differently. He told US troops at Camp Lejeune, a Marine Corps base in North Carolina:

"You have fought against tyranny and disorder. You have bled for your best friends and for unknown Iraqis. And you have borne an enormous burden for your fellow citizens, while extending a precious opportunity to the people of Iraq. Under tough circumstances, the men and women of the United States military have served with honor, and succeeded beyond any expectation."
(‘Obama’s Speech at Camp Lejeune, N.C.’, New York Times, February 27, 2009;
<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/27/us/politics/27obama-text.html>)

This might best be described as Generic Invader Nonsense (GIN). Much the same has been said by every war leader and general of every invasion in history. Did Goebbels not argue that Germany was fighting "tyranny" on the Eastern front in 1941? Were Indonesian armed forces not offering a "precious opportunity" to the impoverished people of East Timor in 1975?

Obama next directed his GIN to the people of Iraq:

"Our nations have known difficult times together. But ours is a bond forged by shared bloodshed, and countless friendships among our people. We Americans have offered our most precious resource - our young men and women - to work with you to rebuild what was destroyed by despotism; to root out our common enemies; and to seek peace and prosperity for our children and grandchildren, and for yours."

The precise moment when the illegal invasion demolishing Iraq - the attack that "should never have been authorised and never been

waged" - became a selfless act of friendship in pursuit of peace and prosperity was not identified. Did this happen half-way through 2003? Perhaps early 2004?

America and Iraq have indeed known "difficult times together" - the US has caused them and Iraq has suffered them. The US helped install a vicious dictator, Saddam Hussein, supporting him through his worst crimes, which Western governments and media worked hard to bury out of sight. It then inflicted the devastating 1991 Gulf War and 12 years of genocidal sanctions, which claimed one million Iraqi lives. The 2003 war and invasion have cost a further million lives, have reduced 4 million people to the status of destitute refugees, and reduced a wrecked country to utter ruin.

But Obama’s lies matter little to much of the public, anti-war activists among them. ‘You don’t understand,’ they tell us. ‘Obama +has+ to say all this stuff - it’s not what he believes. He’s out to change all this, but he has to say it.’

This involves a kind of treble-think. Politicians typically hide their ruthlessness behind compassionate verbiage. Obama, we are to believe, is hiding his compassion behind ruthless verbiage - Machiavellianism in reverse.

Which is exactly what was said of Clinton and Blair in the 1990s. Of course it could be the case now. But should we not aim to be a little more socially scientific in our political analysis?

We can observe that, in a way that mirrors Newtonian physics, enormous political forces tend to act unimpeded unless challenged by powerful oppositional forces. We can observe, further, that there is no reason whatever to believe that the greed and violence that have become entrenched in American politics over decades and centuries have simply gone away. Certainly they have not been countered by mass democratic movements rooted in compassion rather than greed. There are no new, mass-based parties rooted in progressive values; no city-stopping protests erupting out of a transformational political process.

If a brand new, benevolent face now fronts the system in which traditionally ruthless forces dominate, rationality demands that we assume it to be a makeover, a brand alteration, an attempt precisely to **reduce** pressure on the system to change.

The Bush-Blair crimes contaminated the American brand with Iraqi and Afghan blood products - we have to assume that the same ferocious system is now in the process of rehabilitating, not revolutionising, that brand. Greed, ignorance and hatred do not miraculously transform into compassion, wisdom and peacefulness, in individuals or in superpowers. Call it Newtonian political physics. Call it Buddhist psychology. Call it common sense.

Obama then spoke to the US armed forces:

“And so I want to be very clear: We sent our troops to Iraq to do away with Saddam Hussein’s regime - and you got the job done. We kept our troops in Iraq to help establish a sovereign government - and you got the job done. And we will leave the Iraqi people with a hard-earned opportunity to live a better life - that is your achievement; that is the prospect that you have made possible.”

The first sentence is a flat lie. Bush also was “very clear” that the “single question” concerned the disarmament of Iraq of its weapons of mass destruction. When it became impossible to deny their non-existence, Bush resorted to talk of “regime change”, although he knew this pretext was illegal under international law. Even this was not enough - the ‘coalition’ insisted the invasion would go ahead whether or not Saddam and his family left Iraq (as they were urged to do) because the goal, now, was “democracy”. As Noam Chomsky noted in April 2003:

“The one constant is that the US must end up in control of Iraq.” (<http://www.zmag.org/znet/viewArticle/10582>)

Leaving Iraq?

Obama announced his plans for US forces in Iraq:

“As a candidate for president, I made clear my support for a timeline of sixteen months to carry out this drawdown, while pledging to consult closely with our military commanders upon taking office to ensure that we preserve the gains we’ve made and to protect our troops. Those consultations are now complete, and I have chosen a time line that will remove our combat brigades over the next eighteen months.”

He added:

“As I have long said, we will retain a transitional force to carry out three distinct functions: training, equipping, and advising Iraqi Security Forces as long as they remain non-sectarian; conducting targeted counterterrorism missions; and protecting our ongoing civilian and military efforts within Iraq. Initially, this force will likely be made up of 35,000 to 50,000 US troops.” (<http://www.democracynow.org/2009/3/2/headlines#1>)

As commentators have noted, 50,000 is a lot of troops. The initial US invasion force in 2003, after all, consisted of 90,000 troops. And Obama did not comment on whether the US will maintain permanent military bases in Iraq. He did not discuss the withdrawal of over 100,000 private US military contractors and mercenaries stationed there.

On the face of it, there was a clear contradiction between Obama’s declared aim to “remove our combat brigades over the next eighteen months” and his leaving 30,000-50,000 troops to conduct, among other things, “targeted counterterrorism missions” - ie, combat missions.

The New York Times helped explain last December 4:

“Pentagon planners say that it is possible that Mr. Obama’s goal could be accomplished at least in part by relabeling some units, so that those currently counted as combat troops could be ‘re-missioned,’ their efforts redefined as training and support for the Iraqis.” (Thom Shanker, ‘Campaign Promises on Ending the War in Iraq Now Muted by Reality,’ New York Times, December 4, 2008; http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/04/us/politics/04military.html?_r=1)

Military occupiers have forever described their combat troops as ‘military advisors’ and suchlike - more GIN.

According to the American agreement with Iraq - known as a SOFA (status of forces agreement) - US forces must leave Iraq by the end of December 2011. But the “must” is actually much closer to a “might”. The New York Times noted that SOFA “remains subject to change, by mutual agreement, and U.S. Army planners acknowledge privately that they are examining projections that could see the number of Americans hovering between 30,000 and 50,000 - and some say as high as 70,000 - for a substantial time even beyond 2011.” (Ibid)

“Privately”, obviously - why, in a democracy, would the public be told the truth?

In support of this private reality, Phyllis Bennis cites retired General Barry McCaffrey, who wrote in an internal report for the Pentagon last year:

“We should assume that the Iraqi government will eventually ask us to stay beyond 2011 with a residual force of trainers, counterterrorist capabilities, logistics, and air power. (My estimate—perhaps a force of 20,000 to 40,000 troops).” (Quoted, Bennis, ‘Obama To Announce Iraq Troop Withdrawal,’ February 27, 2009; <http://www.zcommunications.org/zspace/commentaries/3787>)

Because SOFA allows both sides to suggest changes, power politics has free reign. As Bennis notes, the Iraqi government has, from its beginnings, been “dependent on and accountable to the U.S.” She asks: “do we really think that that government would refuse a quiet U.S. ‘request’ for amending the agreement to push back or even eliminate the ostensibly final deadline for the withdrawal of all U.S. troops?”

The Media Response

The above was covered by the corporate press with the same wilful gullibility that is found in its reporting on all key issues - the pattern is systematic and unvarying. Patrick Cockburn announced dramatically in the Independent:

“The pullout will bring to an end one of the most divisive wars in US history...” (Cockburn, ‘Obama announces

troop pullout,' The Independent, February 28, 2009)

No reasonable person could use "will" in that sentence. Honest news reporting would begin: "It is claimed...". Instead, the Independent predicted:

"31 December 2011

"The date by which all US forces will have left Iraq."
(Ibid)

Ewen MacAskill wrote in the Guardian:

"Almost six years after the invasion of Iraq, the end is finally in sight for America's involvement in its longest and bloodiest conflict since Vietnam. Barack Obama yesterday set out a timetable that will see all US combat units out by summer next year and the remainder by the end of 2011." (MacAskill, 'US withdrawal: Six years after Iraq invasion, Obama sets out his exit plan,' The Guardian, February 28, 2009)

There is no reason to believe this, but it is the required 'liberal' view of the new 'liberal' president's GIN. Stated with this level of confidence it is potent propaganda. MacAskill added for good effect:

"The prospect of 50,000 staying, even if only for another year, produced dismay among the Democratic leadership in Congress."

It is an interesting and significant reality of modern press performance that the right-wing media are often more honest about 'liberal' leaders than the 'liberal' press. Compare the Independent and Guardian's take on events with Tim Reid's in Murdoch's Times:

"President Obama announced the withdrawal yesterday of more than 90,000 US combat troops from Iraq by August next year but his decision to keep a force of up to 50,000 was attacked by leaders of his party as a betrayal of his promise to end the war." (Reid, 'Obama promises to pull out 90,000 troops - but keep 50,000 there,' The Times, February 28, 2009)

MacAskill continued in the Guardian:

"For Iraq, the death toll is unknown, in the tens of thousands, victims of the war, a nationalist uprising, sectarian in-fighting and jihadists attracted by the US presence."

This is truly shameful journalism. The idea that the death toll is simply "unknown" fits well with Chomsky's observation:

"The basic principle, rarely violated, is that what conflicts with the requirements of power and privilege does not exist." (Chomsky, *Deterring Democracy*, Hill and Wang, New York, 1992, p.79)

Just last month, John Tirman, Executive Director of MIT's Center for International Studies, wrote:

"We are now able to estimate the number of Iraqis who have died in the war instigated by the Bush administration." (Tirman, 'Iraq's Shocking Human Toll: About 1 Million Killed, 4.5 Million Displaced, 1-2 Million Widows, 5 Million Orphans,' The Nation, February 2, 2009; <http://www.alternet.org/story/123818/>)

Tirman reported that "we have, at present, between 800,000 and 1.3 million 'excess deaths' as we approach the six-year anniversary of this war."

He added:

"This gruesome figure makes sense when reading of claims by Iraqi officials that there are 1-2 million war widows and 5 million orphans. This constitutes direct empirical evidence of total excess mortality and indirect, though confirming, evidence of the displaced and the bereaved and of general insecurity. The overall figures are stunning: 4.5 million displaced, 1-2 million widows, 5 million orphans, about 1 million dead - in one way or another, affecting nearly one in two Iraqis."

Tirman noted that only 5 per cent of refugees have chosen to return to their homes over the past year. According to Unicef, many provinces report that less than 40 per cent of households have access to clean water. More than 40 per cent of children in Basra, and more than 70 per cent in Baghdad, cannot attend school.

It is important to recognise that it is utter catastrophe on this scale that is being so blithely misreported and downplayed by journalists in the Guardian and Independent. These are genuine crimes of journalism - crimes of complicity and deception perpetrated against the British and Iraqi people.

Even the Guardian's own journalists last year found that "Estimates put the toll at between 100,000 and one million". (Jonathan Steele and Suzanne Goldenberg, 'What is the real death toll in Iraq?,' The Guardian, March 19, 2008; <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/mar/19/iraq>)

Why would MacAskill write of casualties "For Iraq" (not just civilian casualties) in "the tens of thousands" when the lowest figure, one year ago, +just+ for civilian deaths +just+ by violence, was 100,000?

Martin Chulov brought further shame on the Guardian, writing:

"Tens of thousands of Iraqi civilians have been killed during the insurgency." (Chulov, 'We will leave Iraq a better place - British general,' The Guardian, March 2, 2009; <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/mar/02/john-cooper-iraq-basra>)

We wrote to Chulov and his editor, Alan Rusbridger, on March 2:

"I've never seen that formulation before. This is how the truth is slowly cleansed from the newsprint through repeated brainwashing. Now the main context for the

killing is the insurgency rather than the occupation. The occupation itself just +is+ - maybe it's a natural phenomenon, happened out of a clear blue sky. The facts - that it was based on a pack of lies, that it was an illegal war of aggression, an oil grab, and has zero legitimacy such that the US has no right to be there at all - somehow just don't matter to you."

We received no response. The Guardian editor has not replied to our emails since December 2005, such is his commitment to open debate.

The reality, as every thinking mainstream journalist knows, is that free discussion into corporate profit-making does not go.

SUGGESTED ACTION

The goal of Media Lens is to promote rationality, compassion and respect for others. If you do write to journalists, we strongly urge you to maintain a polite, non-aggressive and non-abusive tone.

Write to Patrick Cockburn at the Independent
Email: p.cockburn@independent.co.uk

Ewen MacAskill at the Guardian
Email: ewen.macaskill@guardian.co.uk

Martin Chulov at the Guardian
Email: martin.chulov@guardian.co.uk

Alan Rusbridger, editor of the Guardian
Email: alan.rusbridger@guardian.co.uk

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Please send a copy of your emails to us
Email: editor@medialens.org

ZNet - Gaza & Aftermath

For more than three weeks, starting December 27th, Gaza and its 1.5 million people bore the brunt of a massive Israeli military campaign, supported and abetted by the US government. While Israel has now stopped its devastating air and ground operations in Gaza, it continues the total blockade from both the land and the sea, still pursuing the futile goal of trying to destroy Hamas and allied resistance groups by punishing the population around them.

Noam Chomsky gives a preliminary assessment of the US-Israel war on Gaza and its consequences in an interview conducted by Assaf Kfoury on January 31, 2009. The Arabic translation of the interview will appear in the Beirut daily *as-Safir*.

The public response in the US

AK: From the carnage in Gaza in recent weeks, there is a silver lining in the US, at least at the popular level. The devastation of

Gaza has elicited something different, compared to the Lebanon war of 2006, or the Lebanon war of 1982, or other episodes of violence visited by Israel on Palestinians and Lebanese. This time, for the first time perhaps, the public response in the US has been closer to the public response outside the US. Greater sympathy and support for the Palestinians, more criticism and anger at Israel's actions. There were almost daily protests and demos, in major cities in the US, closer to the kind of public expressions we had been accustomed to see in Europe, Latin America, Asia and elsewhere. This time, for example, we have seen significant participation in the US of Jewish groups in support of the Palestinians and against the Israeli government. We had never seen it before, certainly not to the same extent. This kind of participation has been coming through, not always in the mainstream media to be sure, but through alternative media channels on the Internet. For example, when 8 Jewish activists chained themselves and obstructed entrance to the Israeli consulate in Los Angeles while others carried signs reading "Closed For War Crimes" on January 14, the news came through the alternative channels, but not the New York Times, Washington Post and other major newspapers in the US. Is this an exaggeration of the public response? And if it is not, can it be developed into a popular movement and, by extension, an effective pressure group on policy-makers?

NC: You are quite right that there was a difference in the reaction, a very noticeable difference, and that might turn out to be important. Many people, even knowing little about the matter, were revolted by the savage cruelty and cowardice of the IDF, brutally attacking defenseless people locked in a cage.

But we have to be careful in assessing the popular reaction. Most people are unaware of anything beyond the highly sanitized version that passes through media filters. *Al-Jazeera* is effectively barred in the US, so there was little direct visual reporting. And while the reality cannot be totally concealed, it is presented in fragments, and within a framework of apologetics — and of course portrays the US as an innocent bystander, dedicated to peace and justice, as always.

The strong and principled reaction is from a select part of the population. Polls showed a pretty even split between support for the invasion and opposition to it, and the opposition is mostly on grounds of "disproportion." More revealing are the polls after the war ended — ended theoretically, that is; it is continuing, bitterly, though the facts are scarcely reported. A CNN poll on Jan. 24 found that 60% supported Israel, 17% the Palestinians. 63% felt that Israeli military action was justified, 30% disagreed. A Pew poll had rather similar results (*Bloomberg News*, Jan. 24).

The results are not surprising in the light of how the events were reported and interpreted by the media and the political class. The mantra is that Israel has the right to defend itself against rockets. Virtually no one pointed out that the issue is quite different: did Israel have a right to resort to violence in self-defense? No state has that right if there are peaceful alternatives. And in this case there surely were. A narrow alternative would have been for Israel to accept a ceasefire, as proposed by Hamas shortly before the invasion. In the past, Israel had accepted ceasefires formally, but never in reality, including the ceasefire in July 2008, observed by Hamas (Israel concedes that Hamas did not fire a single rocket) but

not by Israel, which terminated it with a direct attack on November 4. A broader alternative would have been for Israel to stop its US-backed criminal activities in the occupied territories, both in Gaza and the West Bank, such as the near-complete economic strangulation of Gaza since January 2006. That is the way to stop the rocket firing. But matters like these are almost entirely off the agenda in mainstream discussion.

It is remarkable that even when George Mitchell was appointed Obama's special envoy, these obvious facts were suppressed. That is quite an impressive achievement by the doctrinal system and its practitioners. Mitchell's major success, after all, was to broker a peace agreement in Northern Ireland. The British agreed to end their violent response to IRA terror and to attend to the legitimate grievances that were at its root. The cycle of violence was broken. There was progress in human and civil rights in northern Ireland, and IRA terror ended. The analogy to Israel-Palestine is so close that it took real discipline for the media and educated classes to be able "not to see it."

The official response in the US

AK: By contrast, public pronouncements by US officials do not seem to change. If we were to listen to what the politicians say in Washington, we would think it has always been the Palestinians' fault. The Palestinians are to blame for all the bloodshed and hostilities, now and in decades past, since 1948 and before. In the recent Gaza events, for example, that the Israeli-to-Palestinian casualty ration was one-to-a-hundred or one-to-a-thousand does not seem to disturb their conscience in any way. That Gaza has been reduced to a large impoverished, blockaded, and practically defenseless ghetto, does not seem to bother them. So was passed in the US Congress the perverted resolution condemning Hamas for Israel's attack, by a vote of 390 to 5 and 22 voting present in the House and by unanimous voice vote in the Senate. In fact, however limited, there is more dissent in the Israeli media than in the US Congress. But what is remarkable is that if US officials are out of office, they may say the truth or something closer to it, e.g., former President Carter's statements. What are the reasons for this grotesque disconnect between official policy and public opinion in the US? The same imbalance between the two is on other issues. But, on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it is extreme. NC: It is worth noting that it is not all that different in Europe. Statements by EU officials are often as bad as those of Congress. You are quite right about Carter, but he is unique, and sharply criticized in mainstream circles. One illustration is that in punishment for his crime of honesty, he was effectively barred from the Democratic Party Convention in August 2008. That is unusual if not unprecedented for a former President.

Furthermore, the disconnect you mention, while very real, is not far beyond the norm: on a host of major issues, public opinion and public policy are sharply disconnected. The observation has even entered mainstream political science (see, for example, Benjamin Page, *The Foreign Policy Disconnect*; the same is true of domestic policy). That is one of the reasons why party managers design the marketing campaigns called "elections" so that that they largely avoid issues and focus on personalities, body language, and other trivialities. The general population objects and wants issues

discussed, polls show. But here too we find the familiar disconnect between the public and policy.

Consider, for example, the invasion of Iraq. There was substantial public opposition, but virtually no principled opposition among the political class and media. Obama, for example, is praised by critics of the war for having taken a principled stand. That is false, which is a revealing illustration of the prevailing conformism to power, even among dissidents. Obama regarded the war as a "strategic blunder." One could have read the same in *Pravda* when Russia invaded Afghanistan. Nazi generals said the same about Hitler's two-front war, after Stalingrad. There is nothing "principled" about such a stand. It is completely unprincipled.

Authentic opposition begins by applying to ourselves the same standards we apply to others. It therefore would have condemned the war as a crime, in fact "the supreme international crime" that encompasses all the evil that follows, in the wording of the Nuremberg Tribunal. Much of the public did take that position, but it was, and remains, inexpressible in the media or the corridors of power.

The same was true of the Vietnam war. By the war's end, 70% of the public regarded it as "fundamentally wrong and immoral," not "a mistake." Within the media and journals of opinion, the most extreme criticism was that the US began with "blundering efforts to do good" but it became a "disaster," costing us too much, and we were therefore unable to realize our laudable goals (according to Anthony Lewis of the *New York Times*, who was at the critical extreme within mainstream opinion).

These are the standard kinds of criticisms of state crimes that do not succeed at acceptable cost. They are similar to the critique of Israel's attack on Gaza that one finds throughout mainstream commentary, which maintains that the attack was clearly justified, but "disproportionate," and with few gains for Israel.

There are many other examples. In fact, it is the norm. It is a fundamental doctrine of the ideological system that we cannot apply to ourselves the standards we rightly apply to enemies. Whatever the facts, our leaders are benevolent in intent while their enemies are wicked and deserve harsh punishment. Our leaders may sometimes fall into "strategic blunders," and there are some bad people (like the torturers at Abu Ghraib in Iraq, or the soldiers at My Lai in Vietnam). But our fundamental benevolence remains untainted, and the leadership is immune. This is quite the opposite of the Nuremberg tribunal after World War 2, which did not try SS guards who threw people into gas chambers, but rather the leadership, accused of such crimes as "preemptive war."

Elite intellectuals in the West sometimes reach levels that are literally reminiscent of North Korea in their worship of state power and doctrine. Thus in the Clinton years, US foreign policy was praised by elite intellectuals in the US and Europe for entering a "noble phase" with a "saintly glow," as an "idealistic New World bent on saving humanity" is acting from "altruism alone," in defense of "principles and values" for the first time in history; and on, and on, one of the most embarrassing periods of Western intellectual history. Praise of Israel sometimes reaches similar rhetorical heights. But public opinion is often far more sober and

reasonable.

I nevertheless agree that the US-Israel case goes beyond the norm, even though I think it fits within the general pattern of “our conformist subservience to those in power,” to borrow the characterization of Western intellectuals by Hans Morgenthau, the founder of “realist” international relations theory.

Before Israel’s massive victory in 1967, Israel was largely ignored by intellectual opinion, consistent with the US stand of mild but not particularly strong support. But after Israel’s triumph of arms, everything changed. Israel had performed a major service to US power by destroying the center of secular Arab nationalism (represented by Nasser’s Egypt) and protecting the radical Islamists of Saudi Arabia who were Washington’s primary ally. That service established the US-Israel relationship in its current form. Significantly, Israel’s successful use of force also won great praise among the educated classes, with a large impact on reporting and commentary that lasts until the present. The reasons were partly domestic. It is important to recall that at that time the US was failing to suppress Vietnamese resistance. The mood among liberal intellectuals was captured accurately by the prominent historian Arthur Schlesinger, who wrote that US violence will probably not succeed, but if it does, “we may all be saluting the wisdom and statesmanship of the American government.”

Israel came along and showed how to treat Third World upstarts properly; there were witticisms about how we should send Moshe Dayan to help our military in Vietnam. Furthermore, Israel was able to sustain an aura of profound humanitarianism: it was upholding the highest values, “shooting and crying” in the idiom of the day, in self-defense against an implacable foe bent on its destruction. The combination of humanitarianism and mastery of the means of violence is irresistible to the mainstream intellectual culture. And much has happened since to reinforce the imagery.

All of this is quite apart from the powerful strategic and economic factors underlying US-Israel relations, as well as deep-seated cultural links between the two countries, including their historical experience as they are shaped by imagery and myth. The US, after all, is the only country to have been founded as a “nascent empire”: a superior race was removing the native scourge that had no legitimate right to be here, and was bringing civilization and development to a wild land. After liberation from England, the father of the country, George Washington, declared that “the gradual extension of our settlements will as certainly cause the savage, as the wolf, to retire; both being beasts of prey, though they differ in shape.” Israel’s reigning mythology and rhetoric, and of course practice, strike a very familiar chord; and accordingly receive the same acclaim. It is also useful to remember that Christian Zionism long precedes Jewish Zionism, and both movements are animated by a kind of messianic providentialism: God has a design for the world, and we, the chosen people, are the agents of the divine mission. There is a counterpart among secular elements. It is not surprising that the numerically dominant component of the “Israel lobby,” by a large measure, consists of evangelical Christians; deeply anti-Semitic but strongly supportive of Israeli expansion and violence as an agency of divine will. That has been particularly significant during the past 30 years, when

party managers realized that they could mobilize a huge voting bloc by presenting the candidates they market as “people of faith.”

Such factors as these should not be ignored.

The wider context

AK: Reading or hearing the daily reports of the atrocities in Gaza, we naturally focus attention on the events themselves. We focus on the immediate and largely ignore the larger context. Specifically, we ignore the role which the state of Israel has played in support of US and Western interests. This is perhaps unavoidable, given the scale of the catastrophe befalling the Palestinians now. But stepping back a little from the events, how would you place the most recent attack on Gaza in the wider context, which has developed over several decades? But also looking ahead, what will be likely developments that may redefine Israel’s role in the US-led Western alliance, perhaps pulling the two apart, and allowing or forcing a different relationship between Israel and its neighbors?

NC: There is no need to review here the evolution of the US-Israel relationship. To mention just the bare bones, since 1967, the relationship has conformed to the recognition by US intelligence 50 years ago that a “logical corollary” of US opposition to “radical” (that is, independent) Arab nationalism is reliance on Israel as a base for US domination of the region and its incomparable energy resources. It was clearly understood that this would alienate the “Arab street.” But that was dismissed as insignificant. At the same time, the National Security Council, the highest planning circle, gave a clear answer to Eisenhower’s question why there is a “campaign of hatred” against us among the population, though not the leaders. The reason, they explained, is that there is a perception in the Arab world that the US blocks democracy and development, and supports tyranny, so as to gain control of the oil resources. The NSC observed that the perception is accurate, and concluded that we must continue on this course. It is the task of the allied dictatorships to control “the street.” That was long before US support for Israel became a major issue. These remain guiding principles.

By now Israel is virtually an offshore US military base and intelligence center. That fact was illustrated dramatically on December 31, right in the midst of the fierce attack on Gaza, by a Pentagon announcement that the US was commissioning a German commercial vessel to bring a huge shipment of armaments to Israel (the shipment was blocked by the Greek government, so different means had to be found). The announcement passed without notice, just as the media takes no notice of the fact that Israel is relying on US weapons, in violation of US law. The few who inquired were informed that the arms were not intended for Israel’s attack on Gaza, but were being pre-positioned for the use of the US military — that is, for aggression, which is routinely called “defense” and commitment to “stability.”

Israel is also a valued high-tech center, as illustrated by the increase of investment in Israel by leading US high-tech firms: Intel, Microsoft, etc. In military industry, relations are so intimate that one of the leading Israeli military producers, Rafael, plans to move most of its development and manufacturing operations to the US — to provide the arms more efficiently to the IDF. And Israel performs many other services to state and corporate power.

In contrast, Palestinians offer nothing to US power centers. They are weak, impoverished, and defenseless. Accordingly, they have no rights, by elementary principles of statecraft. In fact they have negative rights, since their plight stirs up "the Arab street." Enhancing Israeli power at the expense of Palestinians therefore makes sense.

The primary goal of the attack on Gaza was to silence any Palestinian opposition to the US-backed Israeli takeover of whatever is of value in the West Bank, while undermining the prospects for a viable two-state settlement in accord with the international consensus that the US and Israel have blocked for over 30 years, in international isolation, and still do — other facts that are scrupulously kept from the general public and unknown to the educated classes as well, with rare exceptions. West Bank opposition has been largely controlled by Israeli violence, now with the support of collaborationist Palestinian forces trained and armed by the US and its friendly dictators: it is notable that Obama, in his few statements on the conflict, stressed Jordan's constructive role in training these forces. But Gaza — the other portion of what remains of Palestine — had not yet been subdued. In that context the destruction of Gaza and annihilation of its social and cultural institutions makes good strategic sense.

And it also makes sense for US-backed Israeli settlement and development projects to proceed in the West Bank while attention is diverted to the destruction of Gaza.

But there are counter-forces. These actions rely on the willingness of the West to support them, and on the complicity of Arab leaders. And all of this in turn depends on whether the populations will passively accept their contribution to criminal violence, repression, and illegal expansion. On that matter, as you mentioned before, the mood is changing, and may change sufficiently to bring the US to conformity with the overwhelming international call for a viable two-state settlement, and to induce the EU to adopt a stance more independent of US power. Something similar might happen, in some fashion, in the Arab world. Palestinians have shown astonishing courage and endurance, but they cannot, alone, confront the overwhelming power of US, tolerated or supported by the EU and the Arab dictatorships.

The long view

AK: This is related to the previous question, but away from global geopolitics and closer to how Israeli society views itself, if it is to live peacefully with its neighbors in the future. There are well-informed commentators who have a bleak reading of Israel's history, not because of its past deeds, but because of how it projects itself now and into the future — a society that will remain an advance post of the West against a rising East — and because of its dogged refusal to acknowledge that its interests, as it sees them, have been predicated on the destruction of Palestinian society and antagonism to its neighbors. This is a reading that can come from the right, reflecting the view of an unavoidable "clash of civilizations" as propounded by people like Samuel Huntington. And it can come from the left, that there is no possible compromise, that this is "the logic of colonial power." This is the title of a recent essay by Nir Rosen, commenting on the Gaza events. Rosen is an

intelligent journalist and highly informed on Middle East affairs. According to Rosen, short of a transformation which Israel and its overwhelming majority reject, Israelis and Palestinians cannot coexist in historic Palestine, one of the two national groups will have to be excluded (forced to flee or emigrate, or just killed). One of the two societies is doomed in the long run. But, of course, such a scenario cannot be limited to Israel/Palestine and will engulf an already deeply wounded region into many more decades of bloodletting. Anything in the horizon that may give the lie to this apocalyptic vision? NC: The description is accurate enough, but I am skeptical about the conclusion, for reasons to which I will return.

As for the description, in 1971, Israel made a fateful decision: President Sadat of Egypt offered a full peace treaty to Israel, with nothing for the Palestinians. While he spoke of implementing full withdrawal, in accord with UN 242 as understood at the time by the US along with others, it was clear that his prime concern was the Sinai. If Israel had accepted Sadat's peace offer, its security would have been largely guaranteed. Israel considered the offer, recognizing it to be a genuine peace offer, but rejected it, preferring expansion — at that time to the northeast Sinai, where programs were soon implemented to drive out the Bedouin inhabitants and to build Jewish settlements and a major port city, Yamit.

Israel was compelled to accept Sadat's 1971 offer, at Camp David in 1978-79, but only after a major war that was a near-disaster for Israel.

Since 1971 Israel has, with rare exceptions, preferred expansion to security. That of course entails reliance on the US as its protector. There have been many examples. One of the most noteworthy was Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982, intended, as was hardly concealed, to put an end to annoying Palestinian peace initiatives and to enable Israel to carry out its illegal settlement and development programs (another goal, not achieved, was to install a client state in Lebanon). The pretext for the attack was to protect the Galilee from rocketing from Lebanon. That was utter fraud, but it is commonly accepted in the US, even by critics of Israeli policies, like Jimmy Carter: that is the one serious error in Carter's book on Israel-Palestine, but was ignored in the barrage of criticism, because the lie is so convenient and commonly accepted. The goal of the war was expansion. It hardly contributed to security.

One cannot say that the policy has failed. It has largely achieved the goals explained by General Ezer Weizmann, commander of the Air Force in 1967 (later President of Israel): Contrary to the propaganda, Israel faced no threat of destruction at the time but the conquests enabled it to "exist according to the scale, spirit and quality she now embodies ... We entered the Six-Day War in order to secure a position in which we can manage our lives here according to our wishes without external pressures."

The same reasoning holds for the expansion into the occupied territories. It is illegal as Israel was at once advised by the government's top legal advisers, but that does not matter: it enhances the "scale, spirit and quality" of the state. The Palestinians are systematically crushed, but neighboring states

pose little security threat, and in fact relations are slowly improving. And with firm US backing, Israel can reach the same conclusion as that of the Eisenhower administration 50 years ago: the "Arab street" does not matter, as long as the populations can be controlled by force.

There is a tendency to underestimate the efficacy of violence. Quite often it succeeds. The history of the United States is a very clear example. The colonies became a territorial empire by violence, though some of the founders lamented the fate of "that hapless race of native Americans, which we are exterminating with such merciless and perfidious cruelty," so wrote John Quincy Adams, long after his own major contribution to the crimes. And it has greatly expanded its power since. On a smaller scale, Israel might aspire to a similar course, at least as long as its actions receive US backing.

The outcome might not be as apocalyptic as the grim forecast of Nir Rosen and others. From 1967, Israel has had plans to take over whatever is of value in the occupied territories, and to leave the Palestinians to "live like dogs," as Moshe Dayan put it, perhaps as picturesque figures leading goats in the distance for tourists to watch as they speed along Israeli-only superhighways. These are the plans that are being implemented right now. They are not concealed, except from the American public, which sustains them. Contrary to many erroneous conclusions, these plans should not pose an insuperable "demographic problem" for Israel — the perennial problem of too many non-Jews in a "democratic Jewish state." Palestinians can be left to rot, without Israel taking responsibility for them. They can call the fragments left to them a "state" if they like, or they can call them "fried chicken," as the ultra-right Netanyahu government suggested in 1996 when it came into office, as it presumably will again in a few weeks. That appears to be the first indication by an Israeli government that it might tolerate a Palestinian state; the prospect had been forcefully rejected by Prime Minister Shimon Peres, as he was about to leave office in 1996. Gazans can survive as "drugged roaches scurrying in a bottle," in the elegant phrase of Chief of Staff Rafael Eitan. Arab citizens of Israel can be removed either by transfer or by border modifications, in accord with the proposals of Avigdor Lieberman, the Moldovan head of an ultra-nationalist right-wing party that is expected to gain in the elections, and to be part of the governing coalition. His proposal was at first bitterly denounced as racist, but it has now migrated to the center as the country lurches to the jingoist right. It is advocated, for example, by Tsipi Livni, the head of Kadima, considered a dove in the Israeli spectrum.

Hardly attractive, but not apocalyptic either. And not at all unlikely as matters are now progressing.

Is there any hope for a more attractive future? Quite definitely. Eight years ago, in negotiations in Taba, Israeli and Palestinian high officials came close to an agreement that approximated the long-standing international consensus. In their last press conference they said that in a few more days they might have concluded an agreement, but the negotiations were called off prematurely by Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak. That week in Taba is the one real break in over 30 years of US-Israeli rejectionism. The negotiations could proceed because they were tolerated by President Clinton, in his last month in office: in fact,

they took place within the loose framework of his "parameters." It is worth noting that the famous Lobby, which rarely challenges US power, was silent at the time.

A great deal has happened since then, but the fundamentals have not changed so radically that a return to that possibility is out of the question. What it requires, again, is the willingness of the US government to permit a peaceful diplomatic settlement. And while there is no sign of that now, with sufficient pressure within the US, or from the outside, it could happen. If such an arrangement is reached, it may be a step towards a more humane outcome in the future.

The complicity of Arab states

AK: Not to forget, it is not only Israel that has been implicated in the devastation of Palestinian society. Arab states, in particular Egypt and Saudi Arabia, have played a particularly pernicious role in the recent Gaza onslaught. Both made clear that Hamas cannot be allowed to prevail in Gaza. That Hamas was democratically elected in January 2006 mattered for naught, it had to be destroyed, no matter the price to be paid by the Gaza population. Egypt and Saudi Arabia are crucial pieces in the system of domination led by the US. Part of the battle for a progressive grassroots movement in the US in relation to Israel is relatively easy to identify. The tasks are straightforward: confront the Israeli lobby AIPAC and the many apologists of Israeli excesses in the intelligentsia, promote dissent within the American-Jewish community, demand accountability for the enormous foreign aid package that Israel receives from the US, etc. But where do we begin to confront the US-Egypt connection and the US-Saudi Arabia connection? True, Egypt is the recipient of the second largest foreign aid package from the US, for which we should demand accountability, but there is no constituency to speak of inside American society that is prone to defend the excesses of the Egyptian dictatorship. In the case of Saudi Arabia, there is even less in which we can engage political activists. It seems we need to confront these connections simultaneously (US-Israel, US-Egypt, US-Saudi Arabia) and expose the way they deeply depend on each other. How do we do this? NC: It is true that Egypt is the second-largest recipient of US aid, but that is because of its willingness to support — at least tacitly — US-backed Israeli policies, and US regional policies generally. If the US were to permit a peaceful diplomatic settlement for Israel-Palestine, the need to support the Egyptian dictatorship would decline, and opposition here could more easily be organized. Saudi Arabia is a different matter. It is the oldest and most valued US ally in the region, for obvious reasons: that is where most of the oil is. Like Egypt, Saudi Arabia long ago joined the international consensus that the US and Israel have blocked. The "Saudi plan," adopted by the Arab League, even goes beyond the consensus in calling for full normalization of relations with Israel. It is significant that President Obama, in his first foreign policy statements, praised the plan while deliberately excluding its central component: a two-state settlement. But though so far Obama is at least as extremist as Bush on these matters, that too can change, and if the US joins the rest of the world, the US-Saudi connections can be addressed in a different manner. That is not the whole story, of course; oil politics

is a separate matter, though of course related. But I think that a lot of ground would be cleared if the US were to abandon its rejectionist stand.

Back to the immediate

AK: There is now a cease-fire of sorts. It is a very temporary relief. It stops the carnage, but does it make the Palestinian plight any less desperate? Yes, after what has happened in Gaza in recent weeks, peace with Israel seems more remote than ever. Israel may not have achieved all of its proclaimed goals in Gaza, and some commentators on the left even maintain that "Israel was defeated" or that "the war on Gaza was a another setback for Israel" — allowing for some hyperbole, perhaps this is so from a long-term historical perspective. But for the immediate next few years, Israel, far more than the Palestinians, can continue to live with an unresolved conflict. Israeli society continues to function reasonably well, on its own terms of antagonism to Palestinians and other Arabs around them, and its economy is still running and barely affected by the Gaza war. More perhaps, a continuing unresolved conflict is precisely what Israeli leaders want. By contrast, Palestinian society is more fragmented than ever, its economy largely broken and increasingly dependent on external handouts. Obviously it will be a long struggle to turn things around, but for the immediate, where do we focus our efforts in the US and the West more generally? What can we do in specific ways to provide the Palestinians with sustenance for the long haul and help them survive for a better day?

NC: You are right to say "of sorts." Hamas did call for a cease-fire, but Israel, while formally issuing its own cease-fire, instantly rejected it. Israel insisted that no cease-fire can be implemented without the return of the captured soldier Gilad Shalit. He is a household name in the West, unlike the Muammar brothers, the two Gaza civilians kidnapped in an IDF raid one day before the capture of Shalit. Uncontroversially, kidnapping civilians is a far more serious crime than capture of a soldier of an attacking army, but in the West, only Shalit exists — and of course there is no attention to Israel's regular practice over many decades of kidnapping civilians in Lebanon or on the high seas, sending them to Israeli prisons, sometimes secret prisons, sometimes held as hostages for many years. But thanks to deep-seated Western racism and imperial mentality, the Israel demand that there can be no cease-fire without the release of Shalit appears reasonable.

That is only the beginning, however. The London *Financial Times* reports that "rebuilding homes and fixing Gaza's broken infrastructure will depend on Israel's willingness to let in cement, bricks and machinery. Israel is adamant that it will not allow in such supplies in the near future, fearing that a speedy reconstruction of the war-ravaged strip would benefit Hamas and enhance its legitimacy." That form of savagery is also considered natural among Western elites, who have only contempt for democracy unless free elections come out "the right way." Hence Israel can continue its brutal siege, undermining the cease-fire. A siege of course is an act of war.

I also agree that Israel "can continue to live with an unresolved conflict." In fact, a leading principle of Zionist doctrine long before

the state was established, and continuing since, has been to try to delay diplomacy while establishing "facts on the ground," to determine the contours of some eventual settlement. That is exactly what is happening now.

Apart from providing Palestinians with whatever relief we can, the focus of action should, as you say, be in the United States. What are the proper tactics? For those who care about the fate of the Palestinians, the tactics will be chosen so that they work — primarily, work to pressure the US government to depart from its rejectionist stance, so that diplomatic efforts can proceed, and Israel will withdraw to negotiated borders.

UK Indymedia | Disarmers arrested at weapons factory in Linköping ...

Fifth plowshares or disarmament action in Sweden since June 2008

In the early morning of March 22th three disarmers were arrested at Saab Aerospace Systems' weapons factory in Linköping, Sweden. Martin Smedjeback, Annika Spalde and Pelle Strindlund were on their way to disarm Jas 39 Gripen fighter jets, planes intended for export to India, Thailand and South Africa. The peace activists, who are all part of the anti-militaristic network Ofog, entered Saab's industry area in Linköping by cutting holes in the barbed wire fence surrounding the area. Once inside they held a silent minute, dedicated to the twenty children that die every minute because of poverty in a world that invests more money in weapons than in fighting poverty.

In 2010 the Indian air defence will order 126 Jas 39 Gripen fighter jets. Saab is currently marketing these jets in India with much support from the Swedish government. If Saab gets the contract, Swedish jets could be loaded with weapons of massdestruction, as part of the Indian nuclear weapon programme.

- India's 200 billion starving citizens don't need expensive fighter jets. What they need is food and clean water. When I was in India in February, I saw the widespread poverty with my own eyes. Several Indian organizations begged us Swedes to stop the weapons export to their country, says Martin Smedjeback, 35, non-violence educator.

As a symbol of the Indian resistance the activists put a picture of the Indian activist Elsey Jacob on the fence before going inside. A picture of the South African bishop Desmond Tutu was also put up. Tutu is working to make his government cancel the Jas 39 Gripen affair. In 1999 Saab managed to sell 28 Jas 39 Gripen to South Africa to a total of 17 billion Swedish crowns. South African social movements criticise this affair of being bribed. Beside, many critics claim that this weapon affair is taking resources from fighting poverty and HIV in South Africa.

- I simply can not accept that my country, by its weapons export, breeds conflicts and poverty. Sweden will deliver six Jas 39 Gripen to Thailand, despite the fact that the chief of Thai air defence declared in public that the planes will be used in the armed conflict in the southern parts of the country. The affair with South Africa is just as objectionable. According to the South African Christian council, the agreement should be stopped immediately. According to them the country's largest enemy is poverty and that the money is needed for that struggle, says Annika Spalde, 39, author and lay worker in The Swedish church.

- In general, we should follow the law, but senseless obedience is not in any way worth striving for. Civil disobedience by peacefully objecting the law, can be an obligation in certain situations. When governments and companies cooperate to export weapons to poor countries and conflict zones, it is ordinary citizens' duty to intervene, says Pelle Strindlund, 37, author.

The action in Linköping, Sweden, is part of the campaign "Avrusta" (Disarm) launched in the autumn of 2008. By public opinion raising and civil disobedience actions, the campaign aims to stop the Swedish weapons export. In October 2008, two coordinated disarmament actions took place in the towns of Karlskoga and Eskilstuna. Parts for howitzer canon (FH77), going to India, and grenade launchers Carl Gustaf, used by the American army in Iraq, were disarmed. Two of the activists were sentenced to three months prison and demands of 220 000 Swedish crowns, and two other activists to four months in prison.

You find more information at www.avrusta.se. There you also find video material from the action at the Jas 39 Gripen factory in Linköping, and photos of the activists. All this material is free for use.

Double plowshares action in Sweden June 24 and 25, 2008
Double disarmament action in Sweden October 16 2008

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SELECTIVE VISION: IRAN, ISRAEL AND NUCLEAR ARMS

march 17, 2009

SELECTIVE VISION: IRAN, ISRAEL AND NUCLEAR ARMS

Gullible's (Endless) Travels

Have journalists learnt nothing from recent history? It truly is a wonder when a reporter can assert in public, on the BBC News no less, that "Tony Blair passionately believed that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction and posed a grave threat." (BBC1, Six O'Clock

News, February 24, 2009). When BBC reporter Reeta Chakrabarti was challenged on this remarkable display of naïveté, she compounded her grievous error by responding:

"I said Mr Blair passionately believed Iraq had wmd because he has consistently said so. When challenged he has stuck to his guns." (Email posted on the Media Lens Message Board, March 2, 2009)

So when a demonstrably mendacious leader claims he "passionately believed" in a lie, the media has to take him at his word. This is the same brand of journalistic gullibility that has had such tragic consequences for the people of Iraq. This is the endless, uncritical obedience to power that boosted the warmongering agenda of London and Washington, allowing them to fit 'facts' to a pre-ordained policy of launching a war of aggression. Such an act, sold by the BBC as Blair's "passionate belief", is the supreme international crime, as judged by the 1946 Nuremberg Tribunal.

And a similar tragic fate may yet befall the people of Iran, if the corporate media portrayal of Iran as a rogue state lorded over by "ruling mullahs", desperate to get their hands on nuclear weapons, goes unchallenged.

A Nuclear Programme Under Close Surveillance

At the end of 2007, a thorough assessment by the United States concluded that Iran's nuclear weapons programme had already halted in 2003. The National Intelligence Estimate was the consensus view of all 16 US spy agencies. (Mark Mazzetti, 'U.S. Says Iran Ended Atomic Arms Work,' New York Times, December 3, 2007)

In its latest report on Iran, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) strengthened this assessment when it stated it had "been able to continue to verify the non-diversion of declared nuclear material [for possible military purposes] in Iran." (IAEA, 'Introductory Statement to the Board of Governors by IAEA Director General Dr. Mohamed ElBaradei,' March 2, 2009; <http://www.iaea.org/NewsCenter/Statements/2009/ebsp2009n002.html>)

But under pressure from powerful Western countries, in particular the United States, the UN Security Council and the IAEA have been demanding that Iran suspend the enrichment of uranium "until Iran's peaceful intentions can be fully established." (BBC online, 'Q&A: Iran and the nuclear issue,' 10:39 GMT, February 25, 2009; http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/4031603.stm)

Under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), a country has the right to enrich uranium as fuel for civil nuclear power, although it must remain under inspection by the IAEA. The agency says in its latest report that although Iran is continuing to enrich uranium, it is doing so at a reduced rate.

The IAEA also reported that it had found an increase in Iran's stockpile of low-enriched uranium (LEU) to 1,010 kg. This figure was over one-third greater than the estimate that had been provided by Iran. However, the IAEA emphasised that "Iran is cooperating well with U.N. nuclear inspectors to help ensure it

does not again understate the amount of uranium it has enriched."

News agency Reuters made an important observation:

"The IAEA statement seemed aimed at quashing any impressions... that the accounting shortfall might have been deliberate evasion."

According to IAEA spokeswoman Melissa Fleming:

"The (IAEA) has no reason at all to believe that the estimates of LEU produced in the (Natanz) facility were an intentional error by Iran. They are inherent in the early commissioning phases of such a facility when it is not known in advance how it will perform in practice."

She emphasised:

"Iran has provided good cooperation on this matter and will be working to improve its future estimates.

"No nuclear material could have been removed from the facility without the agency's knowledge since the facility is subject to video surveillance and the nuclear material has been kept under seal." (Mark Heinrich, 'Iran cooperates after understating atom stocks-IAEA,' Reuters, February 22, 2009; <http://in.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idINIndia-38148320090222?sp=true>)

The IAEA stated that it is seeking improved transparency and further information about Iran's nuclear programme. But it also noted that:

"[T]he apparent fresh approach by the international community to dialogue with Iran will give new impetus to the efforts to resolve this long-standing issue in a way that provides the required assurances about the peaceful nature of Iran's nuclear programme, while assuring Iran of its right to use nuclear energy for peaceful purposes." (IAEA, op.cit.)

Scaremongers R Us

However, for many years, the corporate media has been amplifying supposed "fear" in the West about Iran becoming a nuclear-armed nation alongside the US, the UK, France, Russia - and Israel.

Compare the sane and sober IAEA analysis above with the Daily Telegraph's reporting last month of "fears in Israel and the US that Iran is approaching the point of no return in its ability to build atom bomb." Use of "the point of no return" is a classic scare tactic intended to induce a sense of panic. Time is running out! Soon it will be too late! As though warmongering propaganda over Iraq had taken place in a parallel universe, the paper blithely asserted that "Israeli and Western intelligence agencies believe the 20-year-old programme, which was a secret until 2002, is designed to give the ruling mullahs an atom bomb." (Philip Sherwell, 'Israel launches covert war against Iran,' Daily Telegraph, February 16, 2009; <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast>

[/israel/4640052/Israel-launches-covert-war-against-Iran.html](http://israel/4640052/Israel-launches-covert-war-against-Iran.html))

"Ruling mullahs" is another trigger phrase intended to resonate in the public mind alongside "mad mullahs," "Islamic fundamentalism" and "militant Islam".

Remarkably, the BBC told the public, who pay for the broadcaster:

"Germany has warned Iran that it would support tougher sanctions if diplomatic efforts to stop the Iranians acquiring nuclear weapons broke down." (BBC online, 'Germany warns Iran over sanctions,' 15:39 GMT, February 7, 2009; <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/7876659.stm>)

So according to the BBC, Iran is indeed trying to acquire nuclear weapons. The corporation's famed "impartiality" really is a joke.

Meanwhile, the Times maintained its own tragicomic tradition of balanced coverage (see Media Lens Media Alert, 'Selling the Fireball', June 25, 2008).

The paper's chief foreign commentator, Bronwen Maddox, inaccurately described Iran's nuclear programme as "accelerating." In her column, Iran was portrayed as "ambitious" and keen to upset "the balance of power even further in a region already tense about Tehran's overbearing ways." (Bronwen Maddox, 'Ambitious Iran is bent on tilting the balance of power,' The Times, February 27, 2009). There was no hint that it is the US which is "ambitious" and "overbearing" - with a long and shameful record of aggression towards Iran and many other countries in the region - and a proven eagerness to assert its dominance.

It is par for the course, and closely aligned with Western state priorities, for the corporate media to portray Iran as a threat; its "ruling mullahs" desperate to build nuclear weapons or arm "militants" targeted by the US in its "war on terror."

The 'liberal' Guardian plays its part in the same propaganda system. A recent piece by the Guardian's Rory McCarthy about a new Amnesty report on arms in the Middle East wrongly implicated Iran in the supply of weapons to Hamas in Gaza. McCarthy wrote:

"For their part, Palestinian militants in Gaza were arming themselves with 'unsophisticated weapons' including rockets made in Russia, Iran and China, it said." (McCarthy, 'Suspend military aid to Israel, Amnesty urges Obama after detailing US weapons used in Gaza,' The Guardian, February 23, 2009; <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/feb/23/military-aid-israel-amnesty>)

This then, according to McCarthy, is what "it", Amnesty, said.

But in fact Amnesty was +not+ the source of allegations about the origins of Palestinian rockets. Amnesty had merely cited the publication 'Janes Defence Weekly' and was not itself in a position to verify the claims. Worse for the Guardian, as the Amnesty report made clear, the claims actually originate from Israeli and Egyptian security and police sources. Such claims should be treated with

extreme caution and, at the very least, be correctly attributed by the Guardian.

Worse still, Amnesty had this to say on the claim that rockets have been supplied from Iran:

"There have been several reports that Iran has provided military equipment and munitions, including rockets, to Hamas and other Palestinian armed groups but Amnesty International has not seen any evidence to verify these allegations." (Amnesty International, 'Fuelling conflict: Foreign arms supplies to Israel/Gaza,' AI Index: MDE 15/012/2009, February 23, 2009; <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/MDE15/012/2009/en>; page 31)

We wrote to both Rory McCarthy and Siobhain Butterworth, the readers' editor, suggesting they publish a prompt correction in the Guardian. As usual, we received only silence in response.

Friendly Nukes - Israel Doesn't Threaten Anyone, Never Did

No sane person wants nuclear conflict. What single act could be more monstrous than that of instantly incinerating a city full of men, women and children? This is what America did, twice, in its atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. (See David Cromwell, 'Racing Towards The Abyss,' Media Lens Cogitations, January 15, 2008)

Who could argue with the United Nations' "goal of establishing in the Middle East a zone free from weapons of mass destruction and all missiles for their delivery"? (UN resolution 687, April 3, 1991; <http://www.fas.org/news/un/iraq/sres/sres0687.htm>)

But the stoked-up fears, and media hype, over Iran generally overlook the fact that there is already a nation in the region armed with nuclear weapons - Israel. But Israel is a western ally and therefore to be regarded as essentially benign.

Estimates for Israel's nuclear weapons stockpile range from 70 to 400 warheads. An assessment published by the Federation of American Scientists in 2007 concluded that the most likely number lay in the range 100-200. (Steven Aftergood and Hans M. Kristensen, 'Nuclear weapons - Israel,' Federation of American Scientists, updated January 8, 2007; <http://www.fas.org/nuke/guide/israel/nuke/>)

In 2008, the BBC reported former US President Jimmy Carter's statement that Israel has "150 or more" nuclear weapons. (BBC online, 'Israel "has 150 nuclear weapons",' 20:26 GMT, May 26, 2008; http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/7420573.stm)

Unlike Iran, Israel is not a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Also unlike Iran, Israel does not allow international inspection of its nuclear facilities. In fact, Israel has never formally admitted that it possesses nuclear weapons, instead following a "policy of ambiguity." However, in an embarrassing slip, Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert told a German television interviewer in 2006 that Iran was "aspiring to have a nuclear weapon as America, France, Israel and Russia."

Olmert reacted angrily when asked if Israel's alleged nuclear programme weakened the Western case against Iran, insisting no such comparisons could be made:

"Israel is a democracy, Israel doesn't threaten any country with anything, never did."

He said Iran could not be compared to the US, Russia, France and the UK, as Iran had threatened "to wipe Israel off the map." (For a refutation of this mistranslation from Farsi, see Jonathan Steele, 'Lost in translation,' The Guardian, June 14, 2006; <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2006/jun/14/post155>)

Olmert explained in all seriousness:

"You are talking about civilized countries that do not threaten the foundations of the world [and] that do not threaten other countries that they will use the nuclear weapons in order to destroy them. That is why there is a big difference." (Associated Press and Ynet, 'Olmert: Iran wants nuclear weapons like Israel,' December 12, 2006; <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3338783,00.html>)

In 2006, US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates told a Senate committee that Israel possessed nuclear weapons and that these might provide Iran with the motivation to acquire its own. He even recognised that Iran faced a potential US threat:

"They [Iran] are surrounded by powers with nuclear weapons - Pakistan to their east, the Russians to the north, the Israelis to the west and us in the Persian Gulf." (Associated Press, 'Incoming U.S. Defense Secretary tells Senate panel Israel has nuclear weapons,' Ha'aretz, December 9, 2006; <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/798405.html>)

Orwell's Memory Hole

One searches in vain for any corporate media analysis focusing on Israel's large stockpile of over 150 nuclear weapons. Where is the in-depth discussion that Israel might have a reason to divert attention from its own nuclear arms by cynically manipulating fears over Iran?

At best, there is an occasional subtle nod in the direction of uncomfortable truth. For instance, the Guardian's Middle East editor, Ian Black, noted blandly that:

"Israel, which has its own undeclared nuclear weapons arsenal, has been warning for some time that Iran is far closer than believed in the west to being able to build a bomb." (Ian Black, 'US fears that Iran has capability to build a nuclear bomb,' The Guardian, March 2, 2009)

But has Israel been simply "warning", in the manner of a responsible citizen phoning the police about a mad gunman roaming the streets? Or has it, perhaps, been hyping fears about Iran for its own ends - and those of US power?

It is now almost unmentioned in media coverage that Israel carried out a massive military exercise in the eastern Mediterranean last June. This involved 100 bombers, rescue helicopters and midair refuelling planes over Crete, 1,400 kilometres from Israel - about the same distance separating Israel from Iran's uranium enrichment facility at Natanz.

A few days after the exercise, Israel's deputy prime minister, Shaul Mofaz, said:

"If Iran continues its programme to develop nuclear weapons, we will attack it. The window of opportunity has closed. The sanctions are not effective. There will be no alternative but to attack Iran in order to stop the Iranian nuclear programme." (Jonathan Steele, 'Israel asked US green light to bomb Iran,' The Guardian, September 26, 2008)

Around the same time, the US announced that it would sell Israel 1,000 bunker-busting "smart" bombs, capable of penetrating 90 cm of steel-reinforced concrete. It was reported in passing that the US and Israel were in advanced talks about upgrading Israel's Arrow II ballistic missile shield.

In 2007, Israeli forces conducted an air raid against an alleged Syrian nuclear facility. Seemingly unable to obtain US backing for similar strikes against Iran, Israel has launched a "covert war" involving hitmen, sabotage, front companies and double agents to stop "the regime's illicit weapons project." (Sherwell, op. cit.)

Although these developments have been given limited coverage, they invariably, and rapidly, disappear down the Orwellian 'memory hole.' Inconvenient facts are forgotten or overlooked. Somehow, the dots - the West's long record of criminal actions, its current threats and longstanding strategic interests - are never joined. Somehow, there is no in-depth reporting or analysis of Israel's hugely threatening stock of nuclear weapons; or of "our ally's" threat to regional and global instability. Somehow, the West's (particularly the US's) massive financial, diplomatic and ideological support for a nuclear-armed Israel is not part of the story.

All of this is simply not discussed in any meaningful, sustained way by 'mainstream' broadcasters and newspapers. And so, like many others in the region, the people of Iran remain in the crosshairs of Western firepower; just as the Iraqis were.

Sadly, this deadly cocktail of media silence and diversion will likely yield yet more corpses, more mutilations, more victims demented by grief, fear and misery.

Whatever steps each of us can take to challenge the agenda of power propagated through the media are well worth the effort.

A follow-up exchange with the Guardian is archived in the forum:

<http://www.medialens.org/forum/viewtopic.php?t=2958>

SUGGESTED ACTION

The goal of Media Lens is to promote rationality, compassion and respect for others. If you do write to journalists, we strongly urge you to maintain a polite, non-aggressive and non-abusive tone.

Write to Jeremy Bowen, BBC News Middle East editor
Email: jeremy.bowen@bbc.co.uk

Write to Ian Black, Guardian Middle East editor
Email: ian.black@guardian.co.uk

Write to Rory McCarthy, Guardian reporter
Email: rory.mccarthy@guardian.co.uk

Write to Siobhain Butterworth, Guardian readers' editor
Email: reader@guardian.co.uk

Please send a copy of your emails to us
Email: editor@medialens.org
