

# Gaza: A View From the Ground

## A South African Perspective

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Global Research, June 08, 2011

[Socialist Project](#) 8 June 2011

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

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In-depth Report: [PALESTINE](#)

Here in Palestine, disgust expressed by civil society reformers about Barack Obama's May 19 [policy speech](#) on the Middle East and North Africa confirms that political reconciliation between Washington and fast-rising Arab democrats is impossible.

Amidst many examples, consider the longstanding U.S. tradition of blind, self-destructive support for Israel, which Obama has just amplified. Recognizing a so-called 'Jewish state' as a matter of U.S. policy, he introduced a new twist that denies foundational democratic rights for 1.4 million Palestinians living within Israel. For a Harvard-trained constitutional lawyer to sink so low on behalf of Zionist discrimination is shocking. For although Obama mentioned the "[1967 lines](#)" as the basis for two states and thereby appeared to annoy arch-Zionist leader Benjamin Netanyahu, this minimalist United Nations position was amended with a huge caveat: 'with land swaps.'

Obama thus implicitly endorses illegal Israeli settlements (with their half-million reactionary residents) that pock the West Bank, confirming its status as a Bantustan for 2.5 million people, far more fragmented than even the old South African homelands. Another 1.6 million suffer in the isolated Gaza Strip.



Map of Israel.

Obama also claimed, "America values the dignity of the street vendor in Tunisia more than the raw power of the dictator," stretching credulity.

### The Arab Spring Gets In The Way

"He was with the dictators until the very last minute," rebuts Ramallah-based liberation activist Omar Barghouti, regarding both Tunisia's Ben-Ali and Egypt's Hosni Mubarak. "He's missed the point of the Arab Spring. It's not just about the street vendor, it is about social justice. The pillage of the resources of the region by the U.S. has to come to an end."

Resource extraction and Israeli empowerment explain Obama's recent flirtation with unreformable Libyan and Syrian tyrannies, as well as ongoing U.S. sponsorship of brutal regimes in Yemen, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. So it was impossible for the U.S. president to avoid a subtle confession: "There will be times when our short-term interests don't align perfectly with our long-term vision of the region."

"There will be times"? That's the understatement of the year, considering "short-term

interests" reflect the corrupted character of corporate-purchased U.S. politicians. (Obama needs to raise \$1-billion to finance his re-election campaign next year.) Pursuit of such narrow interests gets Washington into perpetual trouble, including bolstering Israeli aggression, becoming dependent upon oil from despotic regimes, and dogmatically imposing free-market ideology on behalf of U.S.-dominated multinational capital.

I am witnessing the results firsthand in Gaza and the West Bank, and was lucky to even get here, for last Tuesday, the day after I arrived at the main regional airport in TelAviv (with my white skin, multiple passports and non-Muslim surname), my friend Na'eem Jeenah also tried to enter Israel en route to Palestine with South African papers. For four hours the Israeli border police detained Jeenah, a Johannesburg leader of the Palestine Solidarity Committee. Intervention by concerned SA diplomats couldn't appease immigration officials, who forced him to board a flight to Istanbul where he waited for another day before returning home.

### Apartheid - Israeli Style

South Africans who get through immigration invariably confirm conditions here that deserve the label 'Israeli apartheid.' Last month, Judge Richard Goldstone's reputation-wrecking reversal on the UN Goldstone report, regarding the Israeli army's intentional killing of Gaza civilians during the January 2009 "Operation Cast Lead" invasion, cannot disguise 1400 dead, of which no more than half were Hamas-aligned officials.

That massacre was, according to Israeli journalist Amira Hass, a chance for the army to practice high-tech urban warfare against a caged populace, replete with white phosphorous, combat robots, drones and other terror weapons.



Erez (Gaza border) protest on Nakba day, 15 May 2011.

Just as I crossed Gaza's northern Erez border post last Friday, Israeli Defense Force soldiers fired on unarmed marchers who are Palestine's unique contribution to the Arab Spring, leaving two wounded. The Sunday before, tens of thousands of these brave people, especially refugees, mobilized using FaceBook and walked to several 1967 lines, resulting in fifteen murders by trigger-happy Israeli soldiers.

Along with the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions non-violent struggle against Israeli power, this Satyagraha-style movement, adopting strategies and tactics pioneered in Durban, South Africa by Mahatma Gandhi a century ago, must strike fear in the hearts of TelAviv securocrats. No longer can they portray their enemies as rocket-launching Islamic fundamentalists who worship Osama bin Laden.

What I also learned from Palestinian civil society activists is that the pillaging of this region by the West is being planned by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank, following similar support to dictators last year - though with unintended consequences! - in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt.

Evidence includes two documents presented by the IMF and World Bank to an April 13 Brussels donor conference, spelling out Palestine's wretched economic fate in technocratic terms. The IMF insists on lower civil service wages, electricity privatization, subsidy cuts and a higher retirement age. The World Bank advocates a free-trade regime which will demolish the tiny manufacturing base.

In his speech last Thursday, Obama endorsed an IMF/Bank document on the regional economy to be tabled at this week's G8 meeting of industrial powers in France. Although Washington promised \$1-billion in debt relief, it comes with conditions such as "supporting financial stability, supporting financial modernization and developing a framework for trade and investment relations with the EU and the USA."

Go ahead and snigger, but absurd as this sounds in the wake of the recent U.S.-centred world financial meltdown, Obama's gift is actually an "attempted bribe of the Egyptian democratic revolution," says Barghouti. In any case there is another \$33-billion of Mubarak's "[Odious Debt](#)" yet to be cancelled, and reparations to be paid.

Concludes Barghouti, "If anything, the U.S. has played a very negative role. The best thing Obama can do for the region is leave it alone. We've seen U.S. democracy-building in Afghanistan and Iraq, so no thank you." •

*Patrick Bond is based at the [UKZN Centre for Civil Society](#), Durban, South Africa, and traveled to Palestine courtesy of TIDA-Gaza and the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation. His full report on the dangers of neoliberal influence in Palestine is available on the [palestine.rosalux.org](#) website.*

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