

Master and Servant

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The Israeli massacre in Gaza is a catastrophe, and not just for the city's tortured inmates, languishing for decades under a merciless occupation. The United States in particular, but also Germany, will forever be closely associated with this unrelenting slaughter of thousands of innocent men, women and children, a slaughter that both countries continue to underwrite materially and diplomatically. Two-and-a-half months into the mass killing, the US vetoed a Security Council resolution that would have restored some hope of survival to those Gazans still remaining after the hell of continual bombing and shelling. By that time, following the Hamas breakout and the murderous attack on kibbutzim close to the Gaza wall, more than 20,000 Gazans had been killed, 8,700 of them children and 4,400 women, and 50,000 wounded, compared to 121 dead Israeli soldiers, one fifth of them victims of friendly fire or traffic accidents. Since the beginning of the war, the Israeli air force claims to have bombed 22,000 'terrorist' targets: more than 300 a day, every day, in an area the size of Munich.

As the year draws to an end, 90% of the roughly 2.3 million inhabitants of the Gaza strip have been made homeless, chased by the Israeli military from the north to the south of the Gaza Strip and back, told to shelter in allegedly safe zones which are subsequently bombed. There is hunger verging on starvation, scant medical care, no fuel, no regular electricity supply, and no indication that the slaughter will end any time

soon. The reason given by the US for vetoing the Security Council resolution demanding an immediate ceasefire was that this would be ‘unrealistic’. Meanwhile the German government, led by its feminist foreign minister Annalena Baerbock, demands ‘humanitarian pauses’ as an alternative to peace, after which the killings are to continue until ‘ Hamas’, prepared for death by a free UNRWA meal, will finally be ‘rooted out’.

What is eerie is that in the unending stream of reports and commentary on the Gaza war it is hardly ever mentioned that Israel is a nuclear power, and by no means a minor one. For a small country Israel is heavily armed, and not just conventionally. All in all, Israel spends more than 4.5% of its GDP on its military (as of 2022), which probably doesn’t include a good deal of free military assistance provided by the US and Germany. Before the latest assault on Gaza, Israel was estimated to have at least 90 nuclear warheads and fissile material stockpiles of more than 200. Even more importantly, Israel has at its disposal the complete range of means of nuclear delivery, the so-called tripod: land-based, air-based, and sea-based. Israel’s land-based nuclear missiles are allegedly kept in silos deep enough to withstand a nuclear attack, making them suitable not just for a first but also for a second strike. For nuclear delivery by air, the IDF maintains a fleet of at least 36 out of a total of 224 fighter planes with an extensive capacity for refuelling. Israel also has six submarines – of the so-called Dolphin class – which, experts believe, can fire nuclear-armed cruise missiles. The missiles have an estimated reach of 1,500 kilometers, providing Israel with an almost invulnerable platform for nuclear defence, or as the case may be, attack. Generally, one can assume that Israel commands the full spectrum of nuclear capabilities, from tactical battlefield arms to the aerial bombardment of military staging areas, to the bombing of cities like Tehran.

It is not known exactly how Israel became a nuclear power, most likely little by little, small step by small step. Certainly, there is no lack of nuclear science in Israel. The US may have helped, some administrations more than others, along with American friends of

Israel deep inside the US military-industrial complex. Like other out-of-the-closet nuclear powers, the US is dedicated to non-proliferation, and indeed has a strong national interest in it, as do Russia and China. Espionage may however have been a factor; remember Jonathan Pollard, a US defense analyst and Israeli spy who after his discovery in 1985 only narrowly escaped a death sentence? In spite of relentless Israeli efforts to get him extradited, Pollard had to serve 28 years in prison until he was pardoned by the outgoing Obama administration, against the wishes of the US military establishment.

There also seems to be a German component, and it has to do above all with those Israeli submarines. Merkel's mysterious claim in 2008 that Israel's security was Germany's *raison d'état*, enthusiastically received by the Israeli government and now parroted literally every day by the German government and its *staatstreue* media, might have to be read in this context. As mentioned, six submarines were delivered between 1999 and 2023. Of the first three, Germany paid for two of them while the cost of the third was shared, supposedly as penance for what the US alleged was the participation of German firms in the development of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction – which, of course, turned out to have never existed. (For the next three submarines, Germany agreed to pay €600 million.)

If the German-built Israeli submarines are fitted for nuclear missiles, not just the manufacturer ThyssenKrupp but also the German government would know. This also holds for the US, which would have turned a blind eye to Germany breaching its obligations under the Non-Proliferation Treaty. From 2016 until a few months before the Gaza war, the prospect of three more German-built submarines, also to be subsidized by the German state, was discussed by the two governments. But this time there were doubts in Israel over whether they were in fact needed. There was also an unfolding corruption scandal on the Israeli side, which among other things involved ThyssenKrupp hiring a cousin of Netanyahu as a lawyer. As the matter was investigated by Israeli public prosecutors, it was drawn into the constitutional conflict between the Netanyahu government and the judiciary. In 2017, the German side

found itself forced to postpone a final decision until the Israeli corruption charges were settled. Then, in January 2022, the contract for the three submarines was signed. Of the estimated price of €3 billion, Germany will be paying at least €540 million.

Israel has never officially admitted that it has nuclear arms; some of its leaders, however, often retired prime ministers, have occasionally dropped hints to this effect, and probably not by accident. Leaving it an open question means no inspections and no pressure from the IAEA. Keeping potential adversaries in the dark about the size and exact purpose, or indeed the very existence, of its nuclear capacity may also offer strategic advantages (nothing is known for certain about Israel's nuclear doctrine, for example). What can be assumed is that Israel is determined to remain the only nuclear power in the region – as indicated by its occasional bombing of nuclear reactors in Syria and its overtures to the US to stop Iran acquiring nuclear bombs, not by treaty *à la* Obama but by military intervention. It can also be assumed that Israel, unlike other nuclear powers, does not preclude first use of its nuclear arms, given it is surrounded by several nations with which it finds itself in a state of enmity. This should hold especially in a situation where the Israeli government considers the survival of the Israeli state at risk, although what exactly survival means remains open, unless one adopts the definition of both the right-wing extremist government of Netanyahu and the government of Germany, for whom the right of Israel to exist includes the right of Israel to define its borders at will.

As the Gaza war continues, the uncertainty surrounding Israel's nuclear force increasingly seems to govern events on both battlefields, diplomatic and military. Protected by its veil of unpredictability, the Israeli government seems to believe it can inflict on Gaza, and soon perhaps on the West Bank as well, whatever punishment it chooses, without having to fear external interference from anyone. In recent weeks, Netanyahu has acted as though he could tell Washington, in particular, that its support for Israel must be unconditional – since, if pressed, Israel could defend itself on its own, relying on its nuclear tripod. The Gaza massacre risks turning Israel into one of the most

hated countries in the world, together with Germany – which unlike the US is solidly united behind the Netanyahu government; yet there seems to be an established view on the part of the Israeli high command that this doesn't matter, since no government near nor far will dare give in to domestic pressure to come to Gaza's support.

There is another angle to this, and one that is perhaps even more frightening. In October 1973, during the Yom Kippur war, what later became known as the Watergate tapes recorded a conversation between Richard Nixon, then still President, and his closest aide, Bob Haldeman. When Haldeman informed Nixon that the situation in the Middle East was becoming critical, Nixon ordered him to have American nuclear forces worldwide put on high alert. Haldeman, stunned: Mr. President, the Soviets will think you are mad. Nixon, in response: That is exactly what I want them to believe. In a nuclear strategic environment, credible madness can be an effective weapon, especially for a government led by someone like Netanyahu. As noted, Israel does not have an official nuclear doctrine, and cannot have one as it does not admit to being a nuclear power. But it seems likely that if the existence of Israel was threatened in the eyes of its government, it would not hesitate to make use of all of its arms, including nuclear ones. This makes it relevant that Israel's present governing coalition includes people who consider the Bible to be a sort of land registry. For many of them, the myth of the Masada mass suicide in 73 CE, after the first Jewish-Roman war was lost, is a powerful source of political inspiration, a fact that cannot be unknown to whatever intelligence is still at the disposal of the US government.

In fact, there is an even more ancient model of Israeli heroism, the myth of Samson, which seems to be no less popular among at least some of the nuclear strategists in and around the IDF command. Samson was a ruler of Israel – a 'judge' – in biblical times, during the war between the Israelites and the Philistines in the 13th or 12th century BCE. Like Heracles, Samson was endowed with superhuman physical strength, enabling him to kill an entire army of Philistines, reportedly one thousand strong, by striking them dead with the jaw bone of a

donkey. After being betrayed and falling into the hands of the enemy, he was kept prisoner in the main temple of the Philistines. When he could no longer hope to escape, he used his remaining strength to pull down the two mighty columns that supported the roof of the building. All the Philistines died, together with him.

Nuclear weapons are sometimes claimed by radical pro-Israeli commentators to have given the country a ‘Samson option’ – to ensure that if Israel has to go down, its enemies will go down with it. Again, when that option might be exercised depends on what the sitting Israeli government would consider a threat to Israel’s existence, which for some might include the imposition of a two-state solution by the UN Security Council. Myths can be a source of power; a credible threat of extended suicide can open a lot of strategic space – enough perhaps to allow Israel to cleanse the Gaza strip of its Hamas-infested population by making it forever uninhabitable. If it is believed to be mad enough to die for a strip of land, or for not having to make concessions to an enemy like Hamas, a country like Israel may, long in advance of actually exercising its nuclear option, manage to deter countries like Iran, or hostile armies like Hezbollah, from heeding popular calls for ending mass eradication by military means.

Has the US lost control over its *protégé*, servant turned into master, master into servant? It is not inconceivable that the public disagreements between the two hitherto inseparable brothers-in-arms are simply theatre, artfully concocted to protect the US from responsibility for the slaughter of Gaza. But this is far from certain, given that the divergence between the two countries’ public statements on the legitimate aims of the Gaza special military operation has deepened almost by the day. Is the US, blackmailed by the threat of a Middle Eastern Armageddon, now forced to allow Israel to pursue ‘victory’ at any price? Does Israel’s capacity for nuclear war bestow on the Israeli radical right a sense of invincibility, as well as a confidence that they can dictate the terms of peace with or without the Americans, and certainly without the Palestinians? The political costs incurred by the US for not ending the killing – either not wanting or not being able

to do so – are likely to be gigantic, both morally, although there may not be much to lose in that regard, and strategically: the ‘indispensable nation’ paraded before the world, helpless in the face of brazen disobedience on the part of its closest international ally. For its place in the emerging new global order after the end of the end of history this cannot bode well for the United States.

Read on: Alexander Zevin, ‘Gaza and New York’, NLR 144.