

Carnage in Gaza: To blame the victims for this killing spree defies both morality and sense

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Washington's covert attempts to overturn an election result lie behind the crisis in Gaza, as leaked papers show

The attempt by western politicians and media to present this week's carnage in the Gaza Strip as a legitimate act of Israeli self-defence – or at best the latest phase of a wearisome conflict between two somehow equivalent sides – has reached Alice-in-Wonderland proportions. Since Israel's deputy defence minister, Matan Vilnai, issued his chilling warning last week that Palestinians faced a "holocaust" if they continued to fire home-made rockets into Israel, the balance sheet of suffering has become ever clearer. More than 120 Palestinians have been killed in Gaza by Israeli forces in the past week, of whom one in five were children and more than half were civilians, according to the Israeli human rights group B'Tselem. During the same period, three Israelis were killed, two of whom were soldiers taking part in the attacks.

So what was the response of the British foreign secretary, David Miliband, to this horrific killing spree? It was to blame the "numerous civilian casualties" on the week's "significant rise" in Palestinian rocket attacks "and the Israeli response", condemn the firing of rockets as "terrorist acts" and defend Israel's right to self-defence "in accordance with international law". But of course it has been nothing of the kind – any more than has been Israel's 40-year occupation of the Palestinian territories, its continued expansion of settlements or its refusal to allow the return of expelled refugees.

Nor is the past week's one-sided burden of casualties and misery anything new, but the gap is certainly getting wider. After the election of Hamas two years ago, Israel – backed by the US and the European Union – imposed a punitive economic blockade, which has hardened over the past months into a full-scale siege of the Gaza Strip, including fuel, electricity and essential supplies. Since January's mass breakout across the Egyptian border signalled that collective punishment wouldn't work, Israel has opted for military escalation. What that means on the ground can be seen from the fact that at the height of the intifada, from 2000 to 2005, four Palestinians were killed for every Israeli; in 2006 it was 30; last year the ratio was 40 to one. In the three months since the US-sponsored Middle East peace conference at Annapolis, 323 Palestinians have been killed compared with seven Israelis, two of whom were civilians.

But the US and Europe's response is to blame the principal victims for a crisis it has underwritten at every stage. In interviews with Palestinian leaders over the past few days, BBC presenters have insisted that Palestinian rockets have been the "starting point" of the

violence, as if the occupation itself did not exist. In the West Bank, from which no rockets are currently fired and where the US-backed administration of Mahmoud Abbas maintains a ceasefire, there have been 480 Israeli military attacks over the past three months and 26 Palestinians killed. By contrast, the rockets from Gaza which are supposed to be the justification for the latest Israeli onslaught have killed a total of 14 people over seven years.

Like any other people, the Palestinians have the right to resist occupation – or to self-defence – whether they choose to exercise it or not. In spite of Israel’s disengagement in 2005, Gaza remains occupied territory, both legally and in reality. It is the world’s largest open-air prison, with land, sea and air access controlled by Israel, which carries out military operations at will. Palestinians may differ about the tactics of resistance, but the dominant view (if not that of Abbas) has long been that without some armed pressure, their negotiating hand will inevitably be weaker. And while it might be objected that the rockets are indiscriminate, that is not an easy argument for Israel to make, given its appalling record of civilian casualties in both the Palestinian territories and Lebanon.

The truth is that Hamas’s control of Gaza is the direct result of the US refusal to accept the Palestinians’ democratic choice in 2006 and its covert attempt to overthrow the elected administration by force through its Fatah placeman Muhammad Dahlan. As confirmed by secret documents leaked to the US magazine *Vanity Fair* – and also passed to the *Guardian* – George Bush, Condoleezza Rice and Elliott Abrams, the US deputy national security adviser (of Iran-Contra fame), funnelled cash, weapons and instructions to Dahlan, partly through Arab intermediaries such as Jordan and Egypt, in an effort to provoke a Palestinian civil war. As evidence of the military buildup emerged, Hamas moved to forestall the US plan with its own takeover of Gaza last June. David Wurmser, who resigned as Dick Cheney’s chief Middle East adviser the following month, argues: “What happened wasn’t so much a coup by Hamas but an attempted coup by Fatah that was pre-empted before it could happen.”

Yesterday, Rice attempted to defend the failed US attempt to reverse the results of the Palestinian elections by pointing to Iran’s support for Hamas. Meanwhile, Israel’s attacks on Gaza are expected to resume once she has left the region, even if no one believes they will stop the rockets. Some in the Israeli government hope that they can nevertheless weaken Hamas as a prelude to pushing Gaza into Egypt’s unwilling arms; others hope to bring Abbas and his entourage back to Gaza after they have crushed Hamas, perhaps with a transitional international force to save the Palestinian president’s face.

Neither looks a serious option, not least because Hamas cannot be crushed by force, even with the bloodbath that some envisage. The third, commonsense option, backed by 64% of Israelis, is to take up Hamas’s offer – repeated by its leader Khalid Mish’al at the weekend – and negotiate a truce. It’s a move that now attracts not only left-leaning Israeli politicians such as Yossi Beilin, but also a growing number of rightwing establishment figures, including Ariel Sharon’s former security adviser Giora Eiland, the former Mossad boss Efraim Halevy, and the ex-defence minister Shaul Mofaz.

The US, however, is resolutely opposed to negotiating with what it has long branded a terrorist organisation – or allowing anyone else to do so, including other Palestinians. As the leaked American papers confirm, Rice effectively instructed Abbas to “collapse” the joint Hamas-Fatah national unity government agreed in Mecca early last year, a decision carried out after Hamas’s pre-emptive takeover. But for the Palestinians, national unity is an absolute necessity if they are to have any chance of escaping a world of walled cantons, checkpoints, ethnically segregated roads, dispossession and humiliation.

What else can Israel do to stop the rockets, its supporters ask. The answer could not be more obvious: end the illegal occupation of the Palestinian territories and negotiate a just settlement for the Palestinian refugees, ethnically cleansed 60 years ago - who, with their families, make up the majority of Gaza's 1.5 million people. All the Palestinian factions, including Hamas, accept that as the basis for a permanent settlement or indefinite end of armed conflict. In the meantime, agree a truce, exchange prisoners and lift the blockade. Israelis increasingly seem to get it - but the grim reality appears to be that a lot more blood is going to have to flow before it's accepted in Washington.

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