

Children of the Dust

By [John Pilger](#)

Global Research, May 25, 2007

The New Statesman 25 May 2007

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

Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#)

In-depth Report: [PALESTINE](#)

As the Israeli army attempts to imprison an entire nation, it is the youngest who suffer most. Half of all Palestinians killed in the past six years are children.

Israel is destroying any notion of a state of Palestine and is being allowed to imprison an entire nation. That is clear from the latest attacks on Gaza, whose suffering has become a metaphor for the tragedy imposed on the peoples of the Middle East and beyond. These attacks, reported on Channel 4 News, were “targeting key militants of Hamas” and the “Hamas infrastructure”. The BBC described a “clash” between the same militants and Israeli F-16 aircraft.

Consider one such clash. The militants’ car was blown to pieces by a missile from a fighter-bomber. Who were these militants? In my experience, all the people of Gaza are militant in their resistance to their jailer and tormentor. As for the “Hamas infrastructure”, this was the headquarters of the party that won last year’s democratic elections in Palestine. To report that would give the wrong impression. It would suggest that the people in the car and all the others over the years, the babies and the elderly who have also “clashed” with fighter-bombers, were victims of a monstrous injustice. It would suggest the truth.

“Some say,” said the Channel 4 reporter, that “Hamas has courted this [attack] . . .” Perhaps he was referring to the rockets fired at Israel from within the prison of Gaza which killed no one. Under international law an occupied people has the right to use arms against the occupier’s forces. This right is never reported. The Channel 4 reporter referred to an “endless war”, suggesting equivalents. There is no war. There is resistance among the poorest, most vulnerable people on earth to an enduring, illegal occupation imposed by the world’s fourth largest military power, whose weapons of mass destruction range from cluster bombs to thermonuclear devices, bank rolled by the superpower. In the past six years alone, wrote the historian Ilan Pappé, “Israeli forces have killed more than 4,000 Palestinians, half of them children”.

Consider how this power works. According to documents obtained by United Press International, the Israelis once secretly funded Hamas as “a direct attempt to divide and dilute support for a strong, secular PLO [Palestine Liberation Organisation] by using a competing religious alter native”, in the words of a former CIA official. Today, Israel and the US have reversed this ploy and openly back Hamas’s rival, Fatah, with bribes of millions of dollars. Israel recently secretly allowed 500 Fatah fighters to cross into Gaza from Egypt, where they had been trained by another American client, the Cairo dictatorship. The Israelis’ aim is to undermine the elected Palestinian government and ignite a civil war. They have not quite succeeded. In response, the Palestinians forged a government of national unity, of both Hamas and Fatah. The latest attacks are aimed at destroying this.

With Gaza secured in chaos and the West Bank walled in, the Israeli plan, wrote the Palestinian academic Karma Nabulsi, is “a Hobbesian vision of an anarchic society: truncated, violent, powerless, destroyed, cowed, ruled by disparate militias, gangs, religious ideologues and extremists, broken up into ethnic and religious tribalism and co-opted collaborationists. Look to the Iraq of today . . .”

On 19 May, the Guardian received this letter from Omar Jabary al-Sarafeh, a Ramallah resident: “Land, water and air are under constant sight of a sophisticated military surveillance system that makes Gaza like The Truman Show,” he wrote. “In this film every Gazan actor has a predefined role and the [Israeli] army behaves as a director . . . The Gaza strip needs to be shown as what it is . . . an Israeli laboratory backed by the international community where human beings are used as rabbits to test the most dramatic and perverse practices of economic suffocation and starvation.”

The remarkable Israeli journalist Gideon Levy has described the starvation sweeping Gaza’s more than a million and a quarter inhabitants and the “thousands of wounded, disabled and shell-shocked people unable to receive any treatment . . . The shadows of human beings roam the ruins . . . They only know the [Israeli army] will return and they know what this will mean for them: more imprisonment in their homes for weeks, more death and destruction in monstrous proportions”.

Whenever I have been in Gaza, I have been consumed by this melancholia, as if I were a trespasser in a secret place of mourning. Skeins of smoke from wood fires hang over the same Mediterranean Sea that free peoples know, but not here. Along beaches that tourists would regard as picturesque trudge the incarcerated of Gaza; lines of sepia figures become silhouettes, marching at the water’s edge, through lapping sewage. The water and power are cut off, yet again, when the generators are bombed, yet again. Iconic murals on walls pockmarked by bullets commemorate the dead, such as the family of 18 men, women and children who “clashed” with a 500lb American/Israeli bomb, dropped on their block of flats as they slept. Presumably, they were militants.

More than 40 per cent of the population of Gaza are children under the age of 15. Reporting on a four-year field study in occupied Palestine for the British Medical Journal, Dr Derek Summerfield wrote that “two-thirds of the 621 children killed at checkpoints, in the street, on the way to school, in their homes, died from small arms fire, directed in over half of cases to the head, neck and chest – the sniper’s wound”. A friend of mine with the United Nations calls them “children of the dust”. Their wonderful childishness, their rowdiness and giggles and charm, belie their nightmare.

I met Dr Khalid Dahlan, a psychiatrist who heads one of several children’s community health projects in Gaza. He told me about his latest survey. “The statistic I personally find unbearable,” he said, “is that 99.4 per cent of the children we studied suffer trauma. Once you look at the rates of exposure to trauma, you see why: 99.2 per cent of the study group’s homes were bombarded; 97.5 per cent were exposed to tear gas; 96.6 per cent witnessed shootings; 95.8 per cent witnessed bombardment and funerals; almost a quarter saw family members injured or killed.”

He said children as young as three faced the dichotomy caused by having to cope with these conditions. They dreamt about becoming doctors and nurses, then this was overtaken by an apocalyptic vision of themselves as the next generation of suicide bombers. They

experienced this invariably after an attack by the Israelis. For some boys, their heroes were no longer football players, but a confusion of Palestinian “martyrs” and even the enemy, “because Israeli soldiers are the strongest and have Apache gunships”.

Shortly before he died, Edward Said bitterly reproached foreign journalists for what he called their destructive role in “stripping the context of Palestinian violence, the response of a desperate and horribly oppressed people, and the terrible suffering from which it arises”. Just as the invasion of Iraq was a “war by media”, so the same can be said of the grotesquely one-sided “conflict” in Palestine. As the pioneering work of the Glasgow University Media Group shows, television viewers are rarely told that the Palestinians are victims of an illegal military occupation; the term “occupied territories” is seldom explained. Only 9 per cent of young people interviewed in the UK know that the Israelis are the occupying force and the illegal settlers are Jewish; many believe them to be Palestinian. The selective use of language by broadcasters is crucial in maintaining this confusion and ignorance. Words such as “terrorism”, “murder” and “savage, cold-blooded killing” describe the deaths of Israelis, almost never Palestinians.

There are honourable exceptions. The kidnap ped BBC reporter Alan Johnston is one of them. Yet, amidst the avalanche of coverage of his abduction, no mention is made of the thousands of Palestinians abducted by Israel, many of whom will not see their families for years. There are no appeals for them. In Jerusalem, the Foreign Press Association documents the shooting and intimidation of its members by Israeli soldiers. In one eight-month period, as many journalists, including the CNN bureau chief in Jerusalem, were wounded by the Israelis, some of them seriously. In each case, the FPA complained. In each case, there was no satisfactory reply.

A censorship by omission runs deep in western journalism on Israel, especially in the US. Hamas is dismissed as a “terrorist group sworn to Israel’s destruction” and one that “refuses to recognise Israel and wants to fight not talk”. This theme suppresses the truth: that Israel is bent on Palestine’s destruction. Moreover, Hamas’s long-standing proposals for a ten-year ceasefire are ignored, along with a recent, hopeful ideological shift within Hamas itself that amounts to a historic acceptance of the sovereignty of Israel. “The [Hamas] charter is not the Quran,” said a senior Hamas official, Mohammed Ghazal. “Historically, we believe all Palestine belongs to Palestinians, but we’re talking now about reality, about political solutions . . . If Israel reached a stage where it was able to talk to Hamas, I don’t think there would be a problem of negotiating with the Israelis [for a solution].”

When I last saw Gaza, driving towards the Israeli checkpoint and the razor wire, I was rewarded with a spectacle of Palestinian flags fluttering from inside the walled compounds. Children were responsible for this, I was told. They make flagpoles out of sticks tied together and one or two will climb on to a wall and hold the flag between them, silently. They do it when there are foreigners around and they believe they can tell the world.

John Pilger’s latest book, “Freedom Next Time”, is published in paperback by Black Swan (£8.99). His first film for cinema, “The War on Democracy”, is released on 15 June

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Articles by: [John Pilger](#)

About the author:

John Pilger is an award-winning journalist and filmmaker whose articles and documentaries have been published worldwide. For more information on John Pilger, visit his website at www.johnpilger.com

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