

Gaza: Where does it end?

Role of the Media

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Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#), [Media Disinformation](#)

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Much of Gaza is once again in darkness, as Israel cut off the fuel to its only power plant. Hospital patients have reportedly died, communications are out, and movement and commerce in an already beleaguered economy have come to a near halt.

Michele Mercier, spokesperson for the the International Committee of the Red Cross, said Gaza hospitals still had medications “but it won’t last for more than two or three days.” Now, Gazans must also contend with the possibility of already scarce food supplies being cut off. Christopher Guinness of UNRWA, the UN relief agency, said the agency could be forced to suspend food distribution to 860,000 people because of the shortage of fuel and plastic bags.

The New York Times, always to be counted on to provide the right euphemisms, reported that “Israel’s defense minister, Ehud Barak, ordered a temporary halt on all imports into the Hamas-run Gaza Strip late last week. The measure, along with stepped-up military operations in Gaza, was meant to persuade Palestinian militants there to stop firing rockets at Israel.” (Isabel Kershner, “Fuel Shortage Shuts Gaza Power Plant, Leaving City Dark,” 21 January 2008.)

Terms like “measures” and “persuasion” sound so gentle. But they cover up a brutal reality that Israeli leaders are keen to boast about: they are acting with premeditation to inflict suffering on the Palestinian civilian population, and they display an extraordinary degree of callousness for their victims.

Israel must instruct its army to “eliminate the rocket fire from Gaza” completely, “irrespective of the cost to the Palestinians,” Israeli Internal Security Minister Avi Dichter told the cabinet on Sunday. (“Dichter: We must stop attacks from Gaza at all cost,” Ynet, 20 January 2008.)

“We are impacting the overall quality of life in Gaza and destroying the terror infrastructure,” Defense Minister Ehud Barak boasted.

As news of mounting suffering came out of Gaza, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert provided further confirmation that civilians were on Israel’s target list: “We are trying to hit only those involved in terrorism, but also signaling to the population in Gaza that it cannot be free from responsibility for the situation.” With fuel running out, he scoffed, “As far as I’m concerned, all the residents of Gaza can walk and have no fuel for their cars because they have a murderous terrorist regime that doesn’t allow people in the south of Israel to live in peace.”

The punishment of Gaza’s population is apparently succeeding beyond Israel’s wildest

dreams. Unnamed Israeli “defense officials” told *The Jerusalem Post* on 20 January “that food supplies were running low in Gaza and would dry up by the middle of the week.” (“Gaza food will run out by midweek,” 20 Jan 2008). Meanwhile, the Israeli daily *Haaretz* cited “Israeli security officials” who said “that the electrical supply difficulties in the Gaza Strip were greater than Israel had previously expected when it cut off fuel to the coastal territory earlier in the day.” (“Barak: Gaza to get one-time fuel, medicine delivery,” 21 January 2008.)

Israeli leaders are usually careful to lace their statements with *pro forma* denials that they are deliberately trying to create a “humanitarian” crisis — though they never define what level of deliberately inflicted suffering might cross that threshold. Gaza’s residents “are hostages of a deranged regime, but there is no real humanitarian crisis there,” said housing minister Zeev Boim, apparently referring to Hamas, not his own government.

The logic seems to be that Israel can do whatever it wants, as long as officials use euphemisms to describe it. As Dov Weissglas, Olmert’s advisor, so notoriously put it when Israel began its strangulation of Gaza in early 2006, “It’s like an appointment with a dietician. The Palestinians will get a lot thinner, but won’t die.” But they do die, in large numbers.

Some top Israelis make it clear that they do not actually believe that Palestinian civilians even exist. Yuval Diskin, head of the Israel Security Agency (ISA), or Shin Bet secret police, responsible for hundreds of extrajudicial executions of Palestinians, told the cabinet on 13 January that the army and Shin Bet agents had “killed 1,000 terrorists in the Gaza Strip in the past two years.” By B’Tselem’s count Israel had killed 816 Palestinians in Gaza in the previous two years, of whom 152 were children and many others were adult civilians “who took no part in the hostilities.” Thus, B’Tselem concluded, the “head of the ISA defines every Palestinian killed by Israel in the Gaza Strip as a terrorist.” (B’Tselem, “Head of ISA defines a terrorist as any Palestinian killed by Israel,” 13 January 2008.)

And, Israel’s exasperated foreign minister Tzipi Livni explained, “Israel is the only country in the world that supplies electricity to terror groups which in turn fire rockets at it.” Thus she confirmed that like Diskin, she sees no distinction between civilians and combatants — in her view the million people plunged into darkness are all part of one giant “terror group.” (“Livni: Hamas can end Gaza siege in minute’s time,” Ynet, 21 January 2008)

Virtually every news report on Gaza faithfully reproduces Israel’s claim that it is “retaliating” for rockets fired from Gaza that have caused minor injuries and damage. When these reports — like those from National Public Radio’s Linda Gradstein or *The New York Times* — do report on the high Palestinian death toll they usually claim, without citing evidence, that most of the dead were “militants” or “gunmen.”

Almost ignored are the comments of John Dugard, UN special rapporteur on the human rights situation in the Palestinian territories, who countered that the “killing of some 40 Palestinians in Gaza in the past week, the targeting of a government office near a wedding party venue with what must have been foreseen loss of life and injury to many civilians, and the closure of all crossings into Gaza raise very serious questions about Israel’s respect for international law.” He condemned Israel for violating “the strict prohibition on collective punishment contained in the Fourth Geneva Convention.”

Nor do these news reports mention that Hamas has observed unilateral ceasefire after unilateral ceasefire, never welcomed with Israeli reciprocation. And nor do they notice that Israel continues extrajudicial executions and military attacks throughout the West Bank even though no rockets have been fired from there.

Israeli officials claim that all Palestinians are justifiable targets of their wrath because they fail to stop Palestinian resistance groups from firing rockets. This is exactly the same logic that Palestinian resistance fighters use when they fire rockets at Israeli towns. "One's heart goes out to the residents of Sderot," wrote *Haaretz* columnist Gideon Levy today of the town that has borne the brunt of Palestinian rockets, "but one should also remember that they bear the same responsibility for the situation as do all Israelis. If a survey were conducted in this battered city, it would show that there is also a majority in Sderot in favor of continuing the occupation and siege, as everywhere else in Israel."

Where then does it end?

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