

Israeli atrocities in Gaza: a political impasse and moral collapse

By [Peter Symonds](#)

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The premeditated slaughter yesterday of innocent men, women and children sheltering in the UN-run al-Fakhora school in Gaza is a war crime for which the Israeli government and military general staff are directly responsible. As atrocity piles on atrocity, it is clear that the Israeli military is using Hamas's rocket attacks as the pretext for terrorising and subjugating the entire Palestinian population.

At least 42 people were killed when Israeli shells struck just outside the school in the Jabalya refugee camp in northern Gaza. Another 55 were injured—at least five critically. Witnesses described a scene of horror with victims cut down by shrapnel lying in pools of blood on the street. Following the attack, a hospital official, Fares Ghanem, told the Associated Press: "I saw a lot of women and children wheeled in. A lot of wounded were missing limbs and a lot of the dead were in pieces."

The deliberate character of the attack was underscored by the fact that the school was hit not by a loose bomb dropped from 10,000 feet, but by precisely targeted shells. John Ging, operations director in Gaza for the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), said that the Israeli army had been given the precise coordinates of the school, which was clearly marked. Noting the school was located in a built-up area, he said: "Of course it was entirely inevitable if artillery shells landed in that area there would be a high number of casualties." Some 350 people were taking refuge at the time inside the school.

The Israeli military issued a statement suggesting its forces had responded to mortar fire coming from the school and that Hamas had once again used civilians as "human shields"—a claim routinely made to justify Israeli Defence Force (IDF) atrocities. UNRWA official Ging denied that Hamas fighters were using its refuges. "There's nowhere safe in Gaza. Everyone here is terrorised and traumatised," he said. UN official Maxwell Gaylard demanded an independent investigation, saying those responsible for any breaches of international law must be held accountable.

The Israeli shelling of the al-Fakhora school is no isolated incident. Ging reported that three Palestinians were killed yesterday in a separate Israeli air strike near another school in the area where no fighting was taking place at the time. The UNRWA has 23 schools sheltering around 15,000 refugees who have been driven from their homes by the Israeli military. Yesterday morning a building next to a UN health centre was hit by Israeli fire—injuring 10 people, including seven staff and three patients. The International Red Cross reported that an ambulance post was also hit, injuring a medical worker.

According to Reuters, at least 75 Palestinian civilians were killed yesterday—indicating a

sharp jump in casualties since the Israeli army launched ground operations four days ago. Eric Fosse, a Norwegian doctor working at the Shifa Hospital in Gaza, told CNN that he had seen more women and children among the casualties on Monday than on any other day since the Israeli offensive began. Most of the wounded men were also civilians. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation reported that the death toll in Gaza reached 660 yesterday.

Today's Financial Times reported that at least 115 of the casualties have been children. Thousands more have been deeply traumatised by the terrifying experience of constant bombing as well as the lack of electricity, running water, food and sanitation. "Even before the Israeli attacks began," the article explained, "some 50,000 children were suffering from malnutrition in Gaza, amid the crippling blockade of the territory. This number 'could be increased by thousands,' warned Isama Damo, who works in Gaza with the human rights group, Save the Children. Many grocery stores have shut and fresh food such as milk, cheese and fruit is scarce."

The targetting of the al-Fakhora school exposes the lie used by Israel and its apologists to justify its war against the Palestinian people as an act of "self defence". The Israeli army is engaged in a desperate attempt to destroy the capacity of Palestinians to resist in any way their decades-long oppression. When Israeli officials denounce Hamas as "terrorists", their vitriol is in reality directed at the million and a half impoverished people crushed into the narrow strip of land known as Gaza.

In a comment in yesterday's Wall Street Journal, former Israeli Deputy Prime Minister Natan Sharansky denounced the UN for failing to eliminate what he termed the "heart of the problem"—Gaza's refugee camps of dispossessed Palestinians. Describing the camps as "the terrorists' unique system of control" and their schools as "indoctrination centres for martyrdom", he accused the UNRWA of being "facilitators for the terrorists' goal of grinding an entire civilian population under their thumb". Sharansky's ravings served to lay bare the fascist rationale behind Israel's deliberate targetting of the camps, the UNRWA and the al-Fakhora school.

Yesterday's attack conformed to a definite modus operandi on the part of the IDF. In 2006, the army waged a similar military offensive in southern Lebanon aimed at destroying the Shiite Hezbollah militia and its base of support within the population. Repeated missile strikes on the town of Qana killed at least 57 residents, including 37 children. The Israeli military also destroyed a UN monitoring post, forcing the pullout of UN observers who were witnesses to its crimes.

The use of such terrorist measures goes back to the very origins of the Zionist state, when Israeli forces and armed gangs perpetrated atrocities against Palestinian towns and villages as the means of expelling millions of Arabs from Israeli territory. The long history of terrorist acts directed against Palestinians, including the 1982 massacres at the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps in Lebanon, flows inescapably from the reactionary logic of Zionism: the attempt to carve out a Jewish state inevitably involved trampling on the rights of the Palestinian people.

The perspective at the heart of the assault on Gaza's population was spelled out in a letter written in 2007 by former Sephardi chief rabbi Mordechai Eliyahu to Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, calling for the carpet bombing of the entire area. As reported in the Jerusalem

Post, Eliyahu wrote that the population as a whole was morally responsible for failing to halt the rocket attacks on Israeli territory. His son, also a prominent rabbi, told the newspaper that the Israeli air force had to kill “whatever it takes to make them stop”—a 100, a 1,000, 10,000, 100,000, even a million.

These comments recall nothing so much as the methods of collective punishment employed by the Nazis during World War II in an effort to end resistance to their rule throughout Europe. They reflect the complete perplexity in Israeli ruling circles and the political dead-end that has been reached in the Zionist project as a whole. Israel’s desperate attempt to use overwhelming military force to suppress Palestinian opposition in Gaza can only lead further into the morass. One can only ask what comes next: the forcible expulsion of all Arabs from Israeli territory?

The US government’s blocking of a ceasefire has given the green light for the Israeli military to escalate its attacks. The reaction of the Bush administration to the killing of civilians at the al-Fakhora school was virtually identical to that of Israel. White House spokeswoman Dana Perino told the media “not [to] jump to conclusions... What we know is that Hamas often hides amongst innocents and uses innocents, including children, as human shields.” The US military has used identical pretexts to justify its own war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan.

While the other imperialist powers, including Britain, France and Germany, have been more discrete about their support for the Israeli war, they too place the onus on Hamas for the conflict, demanding an end to all resistance to the Israeli onslaught as the price of any ceasefire. The Israelis have also received encouragement from the various bourgeois regimes in the Middle East. All of them, whether openly backing Israel—in the case of Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan—or feigning support for the Palestinians—Iran and Syria—are seeking to exploit the crisis to pursue their own economic and geo-political aims at the direct expense of the Palestinian masses and the working class of the entire region.

Notwithstanding the universal support by the major powers and in the international media for Israel, world opinion is rapidly turning against the slaughter being carried out in Gaza. The one-sided war is provoking a wave of revulsion, including among intellectuals and class conscious workers in Israel appalled by the crimes being carried out in their name. The real ally of the Palestinian people is the international working class—including Arab and Jewish workers—which must be united against the Israeli ruling elite, the bourgeois regimes in the Middle East, and US and world imperialism on the basis of the struggle for a socialist federation of the Middle East.

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