

It's Time to End the "Last Taboo" and Hold Israel Accountable for Its Actions

By [Stephen Lendman](#)

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The "Last Taboo" was the title of eminent Palestinian-born writer, scholar and activist Edward Said's essay written shortly before his death in September, 2003. It was also the title of distinguished author and documentary filmmaker John Pilger's chapter about Palestine in his important new book *Freedom Next Time* that's reviewed and can be read at sjlendman.blogspot.com. Said explained his title in what he wrote: "The extermination of the Native Americans can be admitted, the morality of Hiroshima attacked, the national flag (of the US) publicly committed to flames. But the systematic continuity of Israel's 52-year oppression and maltreatment of the Palestinians is virtually unmentionable, a narrative that has no permission to appear." It appeared boldly and courageously in Pilger's book, and it's long past time for it be prominent in the mainstream as well to finally expose Israeli crimes and demand they end. It's especially important now as Israel just began an intensive military assault against the defenseless people of Gaza, which, before it ends, may result in many deaths, great destruction of property and an overwhelming humanitarian disaster even beyond the one already existing in The Occupied Territories.

Few people anywhere have suffered more or longer than the beleaguered Palestinians. For nearly four decades they've lived under a harsh and unending Israeli occupation of their land. They've endured a continued assault to seize it, a loss of their personal and economic rights and a denial of any chance for justice or their very humanity. These courageous people remain isolated in their own land with little support from the outside. Yet it's never broken their spirit as they continue their heroic efforts to survive and struggle to gain their freedom.

The Israeli Assault on Gaza

This article documents events in besieged and now reoccupied Gaza since the Palestinians responded to continued Israeli Defense Forces' (IDF) attacks against them by striking at an Israeli military post near Kerem Shalom crossing, southeast of Rafah, on June 25 killing two IDF soldiers, injuring several others and capturing a third. The Israeli response was swift and deadly but has not yet been unleashed fully as the IDF decides when to enter Gaza full force to launch an assault against the defenseless people there already under siege. The Palestinian strike followed a series of bloody June Israeli attacks on Gaza including the widely reported beach shelling that killed 8 Palestinians and injured 32 others including 13 children. The Israelis admitted shelling the beach but denied responsibility for the deaths. They falsely claimed a Palestinian planted mine killed the civilians there despite the forensic evidence clearly proving otherwise. The corporate media reported the Israeli version of events but ignored the evidence refuting it preventing the public from knowing the truth. It also never reported that the so-called Israeli Gaza withdrawal of its 8,500 settlers in 21

settlements last August wasn't that at all. That staged media event was little more than the resettlement of Gaza's Jewish residents to new homes in Israel proper and the West Bank on other seized Palestinian land. Furthermore, the IDF didn't withdraw. It merely redeployed away from the settlements it was guarding to new positions on the border. Gaza continued to be under de facto occupation and sealed off whenever the IDF wished, as it's now done, and along with the West Bank remains one of the world's two largest open air prisons.

The Palestinian June 25 raid was its response to continued IDF daily attacks against Gaza throughout June that killed about 30 people, injured many more and caused much destruction of property. Following the incident, the IDF launched "Operation Summer Rain" that included closing all border crossings, sealing off the territory to restrict movement in and out including humanitarian supplies such as food and medicine, and surrounding the territory awaiting orders to launch a major assault which it's now begun. The IDF has also stepped up its artillery shelling that has gone on continually for months. It's been firing 200 - 300 or more shells per day into northern Gaza, many close to civilian homes. It's also launched round the clock air attacks with F16 fighter jets and helicopter gunships firing air-to-surface missiles and dropping one-ton bombs on civilian facilities; it's conducting mock air raids; and it's aircraft are breaking the sound barrier over Gaza at low altitudes deliberately inflicting eardrum shattering and terrifying sonic booms against the helpless people.

In addition, air strikes destroyed the three main bridges in the Gaza Valley cutting off the northern part of the Strip from its center and southern parts, preventing vital transportation from moving normally to provide essential needs to the people. The bombardment also destroyed the main pipe providing water for the Nusairat and al-Boreij refugee camps and knocked out the Strip's only electricity generation plant cutting off power for 80% of the population and preventing water pumps and sanitation facilities from operating. These actions increase the likelihood of a growing humanitarian crisis becoming worse with food shipments, medical supplies and other essentials cut off which may lead to starvation and a major health disaster. They're also a form of collective punishment against Gaza's civilian population which is a violation of international law according to the 1949 Geneva Convention Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War. Israel now and in the past has routinely ignored this Convention, including article 33 under it that prohibits reprisals against protected persons and their property. The world community so far has yet to take notice or speak out against what's ongoing other than weak-kneed and disingenuous calls by world leaders and UN Secretary General Kofi Annan for both sides to show restraint. It's hard finding the right words to respond properly to such an outrageous statement, what little else has been said, and most importantly to what hasn't been but should be.

Israeli warships also went further committing a hostile act by entering Syrian airspace and buzzing President Bashar al-Assad's home in Latakia in a deliberately provocative act before being intercepted and forced to turn back. This illegal incursion reflects Israel's continued hostility toward Syria's leadership which it accuses of harboring and supporting Hamas leaders the IDF has targeted for assassination. It may signal further Israeli action to come, with the Bush administration's full support, against a government both countries see as an enemy. An ominous sign of such potential action came in a veiled threat Israel just made against Syria vowing to strike against "those who sponsor" the Palestinian resistance.

The West Bank hasn't been spared either as the IDF conducted nearly 50 incursions into Palestinian communities, razing farmland, raiding homes, seizing five of them for military sites and arresting dozens of civilians including children. In addition, on June 29 the IDF

arrested most of the Hamas leadership including eight cabinet ministers, 25 PLC members from the Change and Reform Party affiliated with Hamas, and other Hamas officials claiming they were responsible for the assault against its military post. All these actions are further illegal collective punishment reprisals against Palestinian civilians as are Israeli threats to extra-judicially assassinate Hamas leaders. Middle East correspondent Martin Chulov of The Australian, in fact, reported on July 1 that in a letter to Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas Israel threatened to kill democratically elected Prime Minister Ismael Haniyeh if the captured Israeli soldier isn't released. The Prime Minister now fears for his life and has gone into hiding. What will it take to finally get world leaders to take note, show a semblance of courage and rectitude, speak out forcefully against this outrageous threat, and condemn Israel for what it's now inflicting on nearly four million defenseless civilians living under its oppressive heel.

This is a particularly desperate time in the lives of the 1.45 million Gazans who live in 140 square miles of the most densely populated place on earth. Daily life for them has been almost unbearable as they've had to endure continued Israeli oppression without letup. With only their spirit to enable them to resist and armed with little more than rocks, small arms and crude homemade rockets, they're pitted against the world's fourth most powerful military assaulting them at will. The toll has been devastating.

The IDF Assault on Gaza Was Planned Well in Advance

What's now unfolding in Gaza was planned months ago by the Israelis. They've just been waiting for a plausible excuse to unleash it. The capturing, not kidnapping, of one of their soldiers as a POW provided it. So far the US, world community and UN Secretary General support the Israeli action by their near silence. And nothing is said in the major media to condemn a clear crime or report anything about the 9,000 or more Palestinian civilians forcibly arrested, now held in indefinite detention and grievously abused or tortured by the only country in the world to effectively legalize torture according to Amnesty International (the US, of course, now also has). Many of those in custody are political prisoners held administratively without charge, and Israeli human rights monitoring group B'Tselem reports Israel's use of torture is widespread and routine against them.

It must be asked why world leaders aren't speaking out to condemn this practice. International law on it is explicit and long-standing. It forbids the use of any form of torture or degrading treatment under any circumstances. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights outlawed it in 1948. The Fourth Geneva Convention then did it in 1949 banning any form of "physical or mental coercion" and affirming detainees must at all times be treated humanely. The European Convention followed in 1950. Then in 1984 the UN Convention Against Torture became the first binding international instrument dealing exclusively with the issue of banning torture in any form for any reason.

Israel ignores international law (as does its US ally), treats all Palestinians it holds in detention with contempt, and feels free to abuse them at will. The dominant media in the West pay no attention and have no interest. These are the ones John Pilger calls "unworthy victims" in his new book *Freedom Next Time*. The Israeli soldier, on the other hand, is a "worthy" one, and reports or just hints of his mistreatment would be headline news. He also deserves lengthy front page coverage in our newspaper of record *The New York Times* which names him so we all know and displays his picture. No Palestinian warrants any attention at all in the *Times* or the rest of the corporate media. They all remain nameless

and faceless.

What's now unfolding in Gaza and the West Bank has been in the works for months. Since the staged summer, 2005 Gaza withdrawal, the IDF has been training for a large-scale incursion and reoccupation of the territory. This was reported earlier this year in Israel's Maariv daily in an interview the paper did with IDF Southern Command General Yoav Galant whose unit is responsible for Gaza. He clearly stated the IDF would employ "more aggressive military activity.....including (re)occupying the Gaza Strip.....as a result of increased (Palestinian) attacks." The general may have forgotten to explain those "attacks" with crude weapons were Palestinian responses to daily Israeli attacks on them with the most sophisticated weapons the IDF has short of nuclear ones. He also forgot to explain how Gazans have suffered as a result of these attacks and near daily killings as well as from the effects of a near forty-year brutal occupation of their territory. The general, however, was very clear that "we (the IDF) have a plan to (re)occupy the Strip" (and) "We are in advanced states of preparing forces for readiness." Another IDF official added that "The only way Israel can stop the rockets is by occupying Gaza. It is elementary. The leadership knows it." The official explained further that in recent weeks the IDF completed its training to reenter Gaza and informed its soldiers to prepare and be ready for orders to move in.

It's quite true that the Palestinian resistance has fired about 250 crude homemade rockets from Gaza into Israel in recent months. It's also true these have been in response to the many thousands of unprovoked IDF artillery shells fired at them as well as frequent air attacks and other assaults against them. Little of this is ever reported by the western corporate media, especially in the US, and never with any context to explain the true situation on the ground. It's also not reported that the IDF trained to be ready to react once it got an excuse to do it which the June 25 incident gave it. And it would never be reported or even considered that if the Israeli leadership and IDF seriously wanted to end retaliatory attacks against them including suicide bombings, an easy way to do it would be to stop attacking defenseless Palestinians. The fact that it hasn't shows it won't and doesn't want to. Those "elementary" considerations are never reported or suggested in the mainstream. Apparently the dominant media never thought of it, but their mission isn't to think. It's only to report what government officials say.

The Gaza Assault Bears Similarity to Lebanon in 1982

The ongoing Israeli assault against Gaza may be following the same pattern as the 1982 invasion of Lebanon to destroy the PLO leadership that resulted in the deaths of about 18,000 mostly Lebanese and Palestinian civilians. Back then Israel needed a pretext to invade to counter the growing respectability the PLO was gaining by observing a cease-fire and preferring to pursue negotiations instead of terror attacks. This was a catastrophe for the Israeli government as it threatened to undermine its hardened position to oppose any political settlement which it could only prevent by portraying the PLO as terrorists. To do it Israel had to find a way to get the Palestinians to reengage in terrorism or at least to defend itself to make it look like terrorism.

Why would the Israeli government then or any other one want to do this? It would seem logical to assume they all would prefer peace and security to continued conflict. Sadly, it didn't then, never did earlier, hasn't since, and clearly doesn't now. The reason why goes to the root of Zionists' aims, especially the most extreme ones. Many Zionists want all the land of "Eretz Israel," the biblical Jewish homeland many Jews believe God gave to the 12 tribes of Israel. It includes much more than present day Israel and the Occupied Territories -

Lebanon, most of Syria, part of Egypt and a large portion of Jordan.

Unlike other countries, Israel has no fixed borders – deliberately. It's been that way so Israeli governments have lots of wiggle room to establish them one day as they choose or are able to do. Most important is the plan to include as part of Israel the ancient lands of "Judea" and "Summaria," the West Bank biblical parts of Israel the Palestinians call the Occupied Territories and claim as their homeland. Israel has maintained the pretense of being willing to allow the Palestinians an independent state. But by refusing to negotiate seriously and continuing to encroach on Palestinian land with new and expanded settlements as well as erecting its "separation" wall, it's clear Israel's real intent is to seize all the land it wants for its own use leaving the Palestinians only some isolated bantustan-like less valuable parts.

Beginning with the negotiations leading to the Oslo Accords and their so-called Declaration of Principles, Israel never negotiated in good faith with the Palestinians. From Oslo, Israel got what it wanted – a Palestinian surrender to recognize its right to exist, end the armed struggle against it, and allow it to continue colonizing the Occupied Territories. In return, the Palestinian leadership got nothing more than the right to be Israeli enforcers to control its restive population – in other words, to accept its subjugation in return for no rights or benefits except for some special privileges the leadership got as its reward for selling out its people. The Palestinian people never got what they most wanted – a viable and independent state of their own in the Occupied Territories, with established borders and its capitol in East Jerusalem, and the right of their refugees to return to their homeland, a right all Jews everywhere have and which UN Resolution 194 guarantees to all refugees as well as Article 13 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Various other Geneva Conventions also affirm this right, clearly establishing in international law the absolute and universal "right of return."

Israel never accepted this right for Palestinians and needs to avoid a political solution to deny it to them. That position was explained by its Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir in the 1980s when he admitted his nation went to war with Lebanon because there was "a terrible danger....not so much a military one as a political one." But Israel couldn't attack without good reason to do it. It found none so it manufactured one after the terrorist Abu Nidal organization attempted to assassinate the Israeli Ambassador to the UK in London. The Israelis blamed it on the PLO that had nothing to do with it. It also went unnoticed or reported that the PLO had been at war with the Nidal group for years. It didn't matter, and the western media, particularly in the US, reported that the "Operation Peace for Galilee" Lebanon invasion was undertaken to protect Israeli civilians from PLO attacks even though there were none. Who would know the difference except the people living there, and the western media don't speak to them unless it's to affirm Israeli positions.

The situation today in Gaza bears similarity to 1982. Israel was horrified when Hamas won a clear majority of the seats in the January, 2006 elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC). Without the larger than life figure of Yasser Arafat to lead it, the Palestinian people finally rejected his Fatah party and its long record of corruption and subservience to Israeli dominance. Since the election, the Olmert led government has clamped down hard on Hamas, calling it a terrorist organization. It's refused to negotiate with it, withheld Palestinian tax revenues, and succeeded in getting an international political boycott of the democratically elected Hamas government as well as most outside aid to it cut off. All this has created an unbearable hardship on the already desperate Palestinian population.

It didn't matter that Hamas declared a unilateral cease-fire, wanted negotiations and was

willing to recognize Israel as a legitimate state provided Israel gave the Palestinians equal recognition, was willing to return to the pre-1967 borders, released Palestinian prisoners and stopped killing and abusing Palestinians without provocation. Israel refused and, in fact, was as concerned about the Hamas cease-fire as it was about the one the PLO observed in 1982 which Prime Minister Shamir explained was the reason Israel invaded Lebanon. Back then, the provocation was the incident in London against the Israeli Ambassador and today it's the capturing of an Israeli soldier. These are hardly reasons for going to war unless the Israelis planned to wage one anyway and only needed a reason to do it. The reasons for Israeli actions today are much the same as in 1982 - to destroy the Hamas-led government as it did the PLO then and to reinstitute one again subservient to its wishes. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas (aka Abu Mazen) is that kind of leader, has always been in his past dealings with Israel, and is the one Olmert wants to lead a future Palestinian government or someone just like him.

The current situation in Gaza also has echos of the IDF's Operation Defensive Shield in the West Bank in 2002. It included Israel's infamous assault against the people of Jenin, a city of 35,000, retaliating against suicide bombings that occurred during the Second Intifada that began after Knesset member Ariel Sharon's provocative visit to the holy Al Aqsa Mosque in September, 2000. The suicide bombings, in turn, began in response to extreme Israeli violence against the Palestinians which by March, 2002 Amnesty International reported had killed over 1,000 of them including more than 200 children. During that Operation, Israeli forces invaded and attacked all West Bank cities causing an unknown number of civilian casualties and deaths. But the harshest assault occurred in April, 2002 against Jenin, including its refugee camp. The IDF cut the city off from any outside help, destroyed hundreds of buildings (many with people inside buried under the rubble), cut off power and water plus food and other essential needs from the outside, refused to allow any help to enter the city (including medical aid), and killed an unknown number of mostly civilian Palestinian men, women and children. No Israeli was ever held to account for these crimes.

Conditions in Jenin today remain grave as they do throughout the Occupied Territories as Palestinians now await the full impact of what an IDF reoccupation may inflict on them. As mentioned above, the Lebanon invasion killed many thousands of innocent Lebanese and Palestinians. It also resulted in what noted British journalist and Middle East expert Robert Fisk called "one of the most shocking war crimes of the 20th century." He referred to what happened at the Sabra and Shatila camps when Israeli Defense Minister at the time Ariel Sharon in command of the IDF sent a proxy Lebanese Phalange militia force into the camps and allowed them to massacre as many as 3,000 or more innocent mostly civilian men, women and children. Beyond a brief and unconvincing censure for his actions, Sharon never was held to account for his crime and, of course, later became Israeli Prime Minister serving until Ehud Olmert succeeded him after his disabling stroke.

It now remains to be seen what the final result of the current Israeli assault against Gaza, the West Bank and the Palestinian leadership will be. It may be some time before we know as it's just beginning. But if the Lebanon and Jenin experiences are examples to go by, many innocent Palestinian lives will be lost, and the state of the Palestinian people will only get far worse before it ever has a chance to become better. Will the world community finally take note and act to stop a likely impending slaughter. The past record indicates it won't. It's the purpose of this writing to demand it does so and quickly and to hold a criminal Israeli leadership accountable for its war crimes and crimes against humanity against the long-suffering Palestinian people who deserve the same freedoms as all Israelis and everyone

else.

Stephen Lendman lives in Chicago and can be reached at lendmanstephen@sbcglobal.net. Also visit his blog site at www.sj.lendman.blogspot.com.

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About the author:

Stephen Lendman lives in Chicago. He can be reached at lendmanstephen@sbcglobal.net. His new book as editor and contributor is titled "Flashpoint in Ukraine: US Drive for Hegemony Risks WW III."

<http://www.claritypress.com/LendmanIII.html> Visit his blog site at sjlendman.blogspot.com. Listen to cutting-edge discussions with distinguished guests on the Progressive Radio News Hour on the Progressive Radio Network. It airs three times weekly: live on Sundays at 1PM Central time plus two prerecorded archived programs.

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