

Massacre on a Beach in Gaza

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Israel doesn't bother with low-intensity warfare anymore. It goes straight for the jugular. Day after day Israel has launched unprovoked attacks on Palestinian civilians only pausing long enough to assemble the requisite lies to fend off the media.

It's quite extraordinary. One day they blow up a family peacefully touring in their new car; killing 3 generations with one mighty blast, and then a few days later they fire a mortar round at a beach in Gaza wiping out 7 members of another family. The entire incident in Gaza was captured on video providing a heart-wrenching visual-account of a traumatized 12 year old girl running around while the limp and bloodied bodies of her parents are carted off to the morgue.

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's response to the tragedy was astonishingly bland:

"The IDF is the most moral military in the world. There has never been, and there isn't now, a policy of attacking civilians."

Olmert's proclamations are meaningless; the IDF is neither more nor less "moral" than any other "organized killing-machine". The IDF simply reflects the prevailing ethos of the Israeli leadership; a leadership steeped in arrogance and racism. If we look at the recent American massacre in Iraq, we see that there's a straight line between the "execution-style" killing of women and children in Haditha and the Bush administration's promiscuous attitude towards torture and cruelty. A fish rots from the head; so it is with the military as well. The culture of impunity begins at the leadership level, not with a few "bad apples".

This explains why the very next day Israel fired off another 3 rockets into Gaza killing 9 more Palestinians including two children and one medic who was attending to the wounded. The policy hasn't changed a lick. The only difference is that the backlash from the Gaza massacre is now be managed by an Israeli public relations team.

According to the Jerusalem Post,

"The Israeli Foreign Ministry has launched an information campaign to change the minds of the world that has already blamed Israel....Israel's message is simple: The Palestinians are responsible".

Once again, Israel has decided to invoke the familiar strategy of "blaming the victim". Fortunately, forensic evidence has already proved beyond a doubt that the shrapnel came from a "155 millimeter howitzer shell from a land-based Israeli firing device". On top of that, the last surviving member of the family, 12 year old Huda Ghalia, has provided a lurid

description of the Israeli shelling of the beach.

“We were sitting and all of a sudden the shells just started falling on our heads,” she said. What could be clearer?

There’s no doubt that Israel is responsible. Their PR blitz is bound to fail. Never the less, Israel has drawn up 6 “talking points” that will be reiterated by government officials and agents in the media. The public relations campaign focuses on three main themes:

1. Deny everything
- 2 Blame the victim (Say that Hamas had land-mined the beach)
3. Create the appearance that Israel was just defending itself.

The Foreign Ministry has added 6 “bullet points” to these general ideas, but they’re hardly worth going over except as a way of measuring the real depth of human cynicism. After all, we’re talking about the life of one despondent, terrified girl whose parents have just been murdered in a senseless act of violence. Olmert has taken that tragic event and transformed it into an exercise for manipulating public perceptions. That’s really scraping the bottom of the barrel.

The broader question that arises from the Gaza Beach Massacre is whether Israel is deliberately killing civilians or not? Certainly Israel has never backed away from its defense of “targeted assassinations”, but does that imply that killing innocent Palestinians can be rationalized as a matter of policy?

Here’s a statement issued by the Israeli Foreign Ministry on this point:

“Israel does not target innocents, yet must fight terrorists who willingly shield themselves behind their own population in their ongoing campaign to kill and maim Israeli civilians”.

The Israeli statement actually creates more questions than answers. It is clear, however, that the fight against terrorism is given priority over the lives of civilians, and that the state claims the right to kill “terror suspects” whether innocent people are sacrificed or not. This is a radical idea and it overturns long-held precedents about the “inalienable” right to life.

But how can the state authorize “targeted assassinations”? Government officials are required to comply with the law. Targeted assassinations are “extra-judicial” by their very nature; it is the deliberate killing of someone who has never been charged with a crime and has been deprived of all due process. The victim has no way to defend himself from completely arbitrary allegations. In Israel’s case, the decision for these summary executions is placed in the hands of unreliable militarists, like Sharon, who have a long pedigree of lying and war crimes.

Are these people who can be trusted pronouncing death sentences on Palestinian “suspects”?

Targeted assassination is premeditated slaughter; it has no place in civilized societies. There’s no link between justice and murder; the two are polar opposites. Security concerns

should not be allowed to transform the law into a weapon for autocrats.

Never the less, targeted assassination is a central part of Israeli policy in the territories. As a result, incidents like the one on the beach in Gaza occur with increasing frequency. This leads us to question whether or not Israel has a policy of killing civilians.

The fact that 12 year old Huda Ghalya and her family were not intentionally fired on makes no difference. The issue is whether Israel has made reasonable assumptions about how many innocent people will be sacrificed in executing their policy.

We assume they have. We assume that Israel knows that from 2001, 552 Palestinians have been killed in Israeli assassinations, and that, 181 of these have been people who just happened to be in the vicinity or tried to help the victims when other missiles were fired. These figures prove that Israel knows “exactly” what the effects of its policy are, and that they still believe it is worth the outcome. Therefore, we can say with certainty that the killing of innocent people is a fundamental part of Israel’s calculation. Whether it is intentional or not, makes no difference.

In Nigel Parry’s “Does Israel have a Policy of Killing Palestinian Civilians?” the author digs into the larger issues surrounding targeted assassinations.

“After you see someone kill a child, you perceive humans very differently after that. We like to assume that when such a completely inexcusable event takes place that the deaths happened by some kind of “accident” or “error”.

“Crossfire” was perhaps Israel’s most successful lie at the onset of the Second Intifada, and no amount of statistics showing otherwise really seemed to penetrate our consciousness and make a difference.

It made no difference because inside we desperately want to believe that the murderers and serial killers of this world are aberrations, rare, that they are sick or somehow different. This conclusion is not possible when you witness a common, recurring pattern with your own eyes, across an entire army. At some point something gives way inside, and your fantasies about basic human decency crumble.” (Electronic Intifada)

Parry draws from his years of first-hand experience living in the occupied territories and witnessing the violent reaction of the IOF to Palestinians protests. In the many cases when he saw young Palestinians shot dead by Israeli soldiers, he never remembers an incident when any of the soldiers were in a life-threatening situation. Parry continues:

“Out of nowhere, when the energy of the clashes seemed to be dissipating, a soldier would suddenly shoot a child or teenager, 100 feet away from them or more Let me be clear. The events I am describing, in the clashes where people died, were not the exception. They were the rule. And not one soldier was ever punished.”

Parry’s description is revealing on many levels. The violence against Palestinians is oftentimes gratuitous, tribal, and steeped in racism. No one was punished in the confrontations he witnessed and no one will be held accountable for the deaths of 8 family members on the beach in Gaza. It is all part of a culture of impunity which has saturated every aspect of the Israeli leadership and trickled down to the soldiers in the field.

Israel's obfuscations mean nothing. They simply reinforce the belief that Israel will not conform to internationally-accepted standards of justice until it elects leaders who are committed to following the rule of law. Targeted assassination is never acceptable. It is a violation of the most essential principle of law; the right to life. No amount of public-relations wizardry or buck-passing can justify firing missiles into crowded areas or the random killing of blameless civilians. The law is written to protect civilians against disasters like the tragedy in Gaza, where a girls' life was ruined in a flash by an errant mortar-round. If the law had been applied, the order would never have been given and young Huda would not have been left wailing inconsolably on the sand.

The law is our only refuge from the terror of the state. We should make sure our leaders comply.

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