

The Misrepresentation of Israeli Aggression as “Self-Defense”

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Last July, shortly after the outbreak of war in Gaza, [President Barack Obama](#) declared that “Israel has the right to defend itself against what I consider to be inexcusable attacks from Hamas.” To demonstrate the general moral applicability of this position, he said that “no country can accept rocket [sic] fired indiscriminately at citizens.” Obama’s claims provided ideological cover for Israel to carry out [wholesale slaughter](#) over the next six weeks in which nearly [2,200 Palestinians were killed](#).

Obama also conveniently turned reality on its head by ignoring the fact that it was Israel that was responsible for nearly [three times as many](#) cease fire violations as Hamas since December 2012. Israel’s violations of the 2012 cease fire caused the deaths of 18 people, while Palestinian violations caused none. Since the end of the 51-day war in August 2014, Israel predictably has gone on violating the most recent cease fire even more brazenly and with complete impunity.

The latest [cease fire agreement](#) stipulated that Hamas and other groups in Gaza would stop rocket attacks, while Israel would stop all military action. As with past truces, Hamas has observed the conditions. On the rare occasions that individuals or groups have fired rockets from Gaza, Hamas has [arrested them](#). (See also [here](#) and [here](#).)

Israel, on the other hand, has failed to live up to its end of the bargain. This is consistent with [past practice](#). Israel has continued its [illegal siege](#) on the Gaza strip, while indiscriminately harassing and shooting at the local population. Fishermen and farmers, who are trying to subsist amid dire economic conditions, have borne the brunt of the aggression.

The [Palestinian Centre for Human Rights](#) documented 18 instances of Israeli soldiers firing on Palestinian fishermen operating within internationally recognized Palestinian waters in September 2014 alone.

By December, [Humanity for Palestine](#) reported 94 total cease fire violations since the August truce. In addition to the many attacks on fishermen, Israeli border guards targeted “protesters;” “fired sporadically at Palestinian homes and agricultural property with machine guns and ‘flashbang’ grenades;” and “seriously injured” a teenager who was shot near the Kerem Shalom crossing.

The first months of 2015 have seen more of the same. According to International Middle East Media Center (IMEMC):

- On [February 25](#), “Israeli forces opened fire at farmers in the central Gaza Strip.”

The previous day, farmers near Khan Younis had been fired on. Two days prior farmers near Rafah were fired on.

- On [February 27](#), Israeli forces “opened gunfire on Palestinian houses in the Central Gaza strip.”
- On [March 2](#), “Israeli gunboats again opened fire ... towards fishermen’s boats in the Gaza strip.” The Israeli forces reportedly “chased some fishing boats off the coast.”
- On [March 7](#), fisherman Tawfiq Abu Ryala, 34, was killed when he was shot in the abdomen by Israeli navy ships. Several attacks in previous days were reported in which Palestinian fishermen were injured. “All took place while the boats were in Palestinian territorial waters.”
- On [March 11](#), “several armored military vehicles and bulldozers carried out ... a limited invasion into an area east of the al-Maghazi refugee camp, in central Gaza, and bulldozed farmlands.”

On March 13, [Palestine News Network](#) reported that “Israeli Soldiers Open Fire on Palestinian Lands and Farmers East of Khan Younis Again.” The article states that “witnesses reported that the Israeli soldiers in the border towers opened their guns [*sic*] fire on the the [*sic*] shepherds and farmers near the security line east of Al Tuffah neighborhood east of Khan Younis.”

The vast majority of the rampant Israeli cease fire violations are not reported by the American and the Western press. When they are, the Israeli military is given the opportunity to provide self-serving rationalizations which serve as the authoritative account of what transpired.

When a fisherman was killed on March 7, a [Reuters](#) article cites an Israeli military spokesperson claiming that “four vessels had strayed from the fishing zone and that the Israeli army opened fire after the boats did not heed calls to halt.” Of course, the fishermen is not able to tell his side of the story because the organization *Reuters* quotes killed him.

There is no mention in the article of any of the multiple attacks on Palestinian fishermen that happen routinely in Gaza. In many similar shootings, surviving victims and witnesses can attest that fishermen are within the agreed-upon six-mile nautical limit, and certainly well within the 20-mile limit guaranteed by the Oslo accords.

In a December article in the *New York Times*, [Isabel Kershner](#) writes that “Retaliating for a rocket fired into Israel on Friday, the Israeli military said it carried out an airstrike on a Hamas site in southern Gaza.” She begins the sentence by stating it is Israel retaliating against Palestinian actions. Whoever fired the rocket presumably was not “retaliating” for the dozens of Israeli military cease fire violations over the previous months, but was implicitly initiating aggression.

More importantly than this biased framing of the narrative, Kershner buries the lead at the bottom of the story: “Also on Friday, six Palestinians were wounded by Israeli gunfire near the border fence in northern Gaza.” She obsequiously follows this statement with Israeli military rationalizations that “soldiers first fired into the air to try to disperse protesters approaching the fence then fired at the legs of some of them.”

Someone who commits a violent action is obviously not a partial source for an honest account of the facts. Would a journalist report on a shooting by only repeating the side of

the suspect who claims self-defense?

Six months after repeated, documented Israeli breaches of the cease fire agreement – without any by Hamas – New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof claimed in an [Op-Ed](#) that “Hamas provokes Israel.” He provides no evidence for this assertion. As the record clearly shows, Kristof has it backwards.

If no country can accept rockets fired at its population, then surely neither can they accept M16s fired at them. Or tanks and bulldozers invading their land. But perhaps Obama was deliberate in choosing his words. He stated that no country can accept rockets “fired indiscriminately at *citizens* (italics mine).”

Since Palestinians live under Israeli sovereignty but are denied citizenship, they are not technically covered by Obama’s moral truism. But assuming what he says should apply to all *people* – even those who are politically subjugated by [racist](#) regimes – Obama’s words would apply equally to Palestinians.

But when asked by a [reporter](#) whether Palestinians in Gaza have the right to defend themselves, an Obama administration spokesperson denied Palestinians this right. She did not explicitly say so, but by evading and refusing to respond to a simple yes or no question, she gave the equivalent of a direct denial. “I think – I’m not sure what you’re getting at,” she said. After the reporter restated his crystal-clear question, she replied “What are you specifically referring to? Is there a specific even or a specific occurrence?”

In the same way that omission of material facts may constitute fraud, refusing to answer a question about whether a person enjoys a right constitutes a direct refusal to recognize that right.

Obama did not only pervert the issue of the right to self-defense by falsely pretending it was a moral truism that he clearly and demonstrably does not extend to Palestinians, he also misrepresents the applicability of self-defense to Israel in the first place.

As Noura Erakat explained in her July 2014 article “[No, Israel Does Not Have the Right to Self-Defense in International Law Against Occupied Palestinian Territory](#),” Israel is “distorting/reinterpreting international law to justify its use of militarized force in order to protect its colonial authority.” Obama willingly enables Israel’s lawless actions by accepting their rewriting of international law to justify their aggression.

What Obama is really saying when he talks about self-defense is that as the leader of one rogue nation, he supports the right of his rogue client state to violate the rule of law and make fraudulent claims that are neither morally nor legally justified.

As John Quigley explains in [The Six-Day War and Israeli Self-Defense](#), failing to challenge Israel’s bogus claims of self-defense in the 1967 war – as the United States has done by providing a diplomatic shield, vetoing more than 40 U.N. Security Council resolutions condemning Israel – has had disastrous consequences for Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the system of international law in general.

“The flawed perception of the June 1967 war serves to perpetuate conflict in the Middle East. It also serves to promote the expansion of the concept of self-defense and thereby to erode the prohibition against the use of force,” Quigley writes.

The United States government under the Obama administration continues to carry this even further. Undoubtedly the situation will only get worse in the future. Last month in *Haaretz*, Gideon Levy wrote that there will inevitably be another war in Gaza.

“Israel knows this war will break out, it also knows why – and it’s galloping toward it blindfolded, as though it were a cyclical ritual, a periodical ceremony or a natural disaster that cannot be avoided. Here and there one even perceives enthusiasm,” [Levy writes](#).

This will mean more death, more destruction, and more Palestinian lives destroyed as the world looks on and does nothing. Sadly Levy is right. When the next war comes and Israel succeeds in baiting Hamas to start firing rockets into Israel, all the talk will be about Israel’s right to defend itself. Obama (or the next American President) will repeat the same charade. He will frame the narrative in terms of Israel’s victimization and Israel’s rights, while denying this treatment to the Palestinians.

The media and the public will uncritically support the position of American and Israeli power. Thousands of Palestinians will be indiscriminately killed, but not because Israel is defending itself. Palestinians will be killed because the U.S. government refuses to protect them from a belligerent and aggressive regime, and refuses even to recognize their right to protect themselves.

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