

Gaza: This kind of “war”

Wednesday 7 January 2009, by [PODUR Justin](#) (Date first published: 6 January 2009).

The current crisis in Gaza began with Israel's breaking the ceasefire with Hamas on November 4, 2008. The five-month ceasefire was unsustainable for two reasons. First and most importantly, because it condemned the Palestinians of Gaza to a slow and wasting death: part of the ceasefire was the continuation of Israel's blockade of Gaza. As part of this blockade, Palestinians could not leave the territory. This included, in high-profile cases, students who had obtained admission and visas to study abroad, but also people who later died because they could not receive treatment for cancers and other medical problems. Remember that the Gaza strip is 360 square kilometers, with 1.5 million people. The people have skills, strong social cohesion, and traditions of hospitality, but the area is not self-sufficient and the economy cannot function without free movement of people and goods in and out. Leave aside that the moral right and legal right of Palestinians to self-defense was denied by the prevention of arms supplies (to even mention this as a possibility is to break a taboo). Every other aspect of life was also disrupted by the blockade. Education was disrupted as Israel refused to allow paper, ink, books, and other supplies in. Health care was disrupted as Israel refused to allow medical supplies. Nutrition and normal child development was disrupted both by the refusal of Israel to allow food supplies, but also by the use of sonic booms, which the Israeli air force uses to frighten the population, and periodic bombing and assassinations.

At this point, Israel is not even allowing Palestinians to leave, so displacement is not the goal, at least for the time being. On the other hand, when body counts rise into the thousands or tens of thousands, Israel might then allow the Palestinians to flee further massacres, and be lauded for its generosity by the international community.

The second reason the ceasefire was unsustainable was deeper. So long as Israel is unwilling to negotiate a political settlement and share the land, with the US on side and with shedding Palestinian blood being a source of political credibility in Israeli society, Palestinians have no choice but to resist. If they are not starved and bombed, they will be more effective at resisting their own displacement and colonization. With each step Israel takes to try to dismantle Palestinian resistance, a genocidal logic advances. Palestinians have been walled in and blockaded. Now they are bombed and invaded. When they have been thrown off their land and into neighbouring countries, they are attacked in those countries, in their refugee camps. Indeed, the people of Gaza are mostly refugees who were thrown off lands in what is now Israel. If they were displaced from Gaza, into Egypt, what would stop Israel from attacking them there? Would being displaced twice offer more protection than being displaced once?

Once the ceasefire ended, Israel was at war. This was a war of choice, and a war it had prepared for extensively on diplomatic and military levels.

The diplomatic scenario was favourable to Israel in several ways. Palestine had been further divided. The West Bank was controlled by Mahmoud Abbas, whose Palestinian Authority collaborates with Israel. The PA is currently maintained in power because the elected Hamas parliamentarians are in either PA or Israeli prisons and because Israeli security forces, as well as the PA, arrest scores of people in the West Bank every week. Gaza was controlled by the elected Hamas leadership. Israel could focus on one enemy and leave the suppression of the Palestinians of the West Bank to the PA. Israel has rounded up hundreds of Palestinian children in the West Bank and shot and killed many

demonstrators there in recent weeks, but these violations have become routine and barely register next to the more spectacular massacres of dozens at a time in Gaza. Hizbollah in Lebanon, who in 2006 interrupted a pattern of massacre and strangulation that Israel was conducting in Gaza ("Summer Rains"), have domestic constraints preventing them from intervening in support of the Palestinians, which would bring more thousands of dead to Lebanon in a new Israeli air campaign, against which Hizbollah has no defenses. Egypt has been more co-operative with Israel than ever before, keeping the Rafah crossing sealed and, at the official level, blaming Hamas for bringing the massacres on themselves. According to Hamas, Egypt also told them that Israel was not planning an attack - which gave the Israelis the surprise that helped them to massacre over 200 Palestinians in a single day at the start of their air campaign. As usual, Israel can count on unconditional official US support from all parts of the political spectrum, which seems to be enough to prevent any useful intervention by anyone else in the world. Many progressive governments, including the most progressive ones, Venezuela and Bolivia, have condemned the atrocities, but have not taken any further steps to try to diplomatically isolate Israel or support Boycott/Divestment/Sanctions (BDS), which might be part of a strategy that could stop Israel. Street protests have been large, in some parts of the world unprecedentedly so. But without any official political expression, these protests can be dismissed and ignored as the February 15, 2003 protests against the invasion of Iraq were ignored.

On the military level, some basic points. Calling the current conflict a 'war' is more of an analogy than a description, because the word 'war' still evokes the idea of armies meeting on a battlefield and contesting territory. Israel has all of the weapons of war, but it does not really have an opposing army to fight. It can take any territory it wants and easily kill anyone trying to contest it. It can hit, and destroy, any target, anywhere Palestinians live, at will. One compilation by the al-Mezan Centre in Gaza from December 31/08 presented 315 killed (41 children), 939 injured (85 children), and 112 houses, 7 mosques, 38 private industrial and agricultural enterprises, 16 schools, 16 government facilities, 9 charity offices, and 20 security installations. The Palestinian Centre for Human Rights (PCHR) figures to December 31/08 were 334 killed (33 children), 966 injured (218 children), 37 homes, 67 security centres, 20 workshops, as well as 40 invasions in the West Bank, killing 3 Palestinians and arresting/kidnapping hundreds more.

Skimming the IMEMC site [\[1\]](#), here is some of what Israel destroyed since the attack started.

December 27-28/08

-Palestinian Police Headquarters

Rafah Police Station

Saraya Security Compound

Beit Hanoun municipal building

Rafah governorate offices

A police jeep in Gaza City

The Palestinian Ministry of Prisoners' Affairs

Greenhouses in Alqarrara

Charity offices throughout Gaza

A medical storage facility

A fuel station in Rafah

A fuel truck in Rafah

A police station in Gaza City (al-Shujaeyya)

al-Shifa Hospital in Gaza City

Houses in Gaza City and Jabaliya refugee camp

Hamas's al-Aqsa TV station in Gaza City

Hamas's Asda' media office in Khan Yunis

Tunnels in Rafah

An apartment in Tal-Alhawa in Gaza City

A car in Nuseirat refugee camp

The Islamic University in Gaza (several buildings, including the female students' residence)

A mosque in Jabaliya

A fishermen's dock at Gaza shore

December 29/08

A house in Jabaliya (killing 5 sisters, all children).

A blacksmith workshop in al-Zeitoun neighbourhood in Gaza City

A house in Khan Younis

A house in Abasan town

-

The Ministry of the Interior in Gaza

December 30/08

The Ministries Compound

The Popular Resistance Committees center in Gaza City

A house in Beit Lahia

Another fuel truck in northern Gaza

The UNRWA school in al-Qarara

Houses in Rafah

A house in Jabailya

A sports club in Tal AL Hawa

A police station in Beit Hanoun

Bani Suheila City Council

Training grounds for the Al Qassam Brigades

The mosque of Omar Bin Al Khattab Mosque in Al Bureij

Al Khulafa' Mosque in northern Gaza

The governor's office in northern Gaza

The Ministries Compound in Tal Al Hawa in Gaza completely destroying it (including the Ministry of Finance, Interior, Education)

A military camp that was previously used by Force 17, loyal to President Mahmoud Abbas.

A dairy in Gaza City

A workshop in Beit Lahiya

Another home in northern Gaza (killing two children)

The Rafah-Egypt border crossing

The house of a Fatah leader in al-Mighraqa

A house in Beit Hanoun (killing two children)

A house in al-Maghazi refugee camp

December 31/08

Ambulances in Gaza City (killing a doctor, a driver, and a medic)

The oxygen refilling plant in Gaza City (used by hospitals in Gaza)

Jan 1/09

Palestinian Legislative Council in Gaza City

The Ministry of Education in Gaza City

The Ministry of Justice in Gaza City

A house in Nuseirat refugee camp

A workshop in Rafah

A picnic park in Rafah

Tunnels in Rafah

A clinic in Rafah

A house in al-Maghazi

Nizar Rayan's home, killing him, his wives, and all of their children (16 people total)

Jan 2-3/09

An apartment building in al-Qarara

A house in Jabaliya (killing 2 children)

A house in al-Boreij refugee camp

A mosque in Jabaliya

The American School in Gaza City

A house in al-Shujaeyya

A house in Gaza City

Fishing boats in Gaza City

A car on the Gaza Valley bridge

A police station in Gaza

At least 20 homes in Gaza

Israeli bombing strategy has been to bomb the same targets repeatedly. This means not only more thorough destruction of the infrastructure, but also additional killing of medical personnel and residents who try to help the first round of victims.

Israel's actions are not constrained by the opposing army but by two political considerations: First, how much killing can it do before it begins to face the threat of diplomatic isolation? Disallowing journalists and observers is part of Israel's strategy to deal with this, as it was for the US in Iraq. Israel's ground invasion has been accompanied by a total blackout even of Israeli reporters. Given the intensity of its intelligence and the precision of its weapons, Israel is able to choose the death toll, with some precision. At least some of the current killing is likely designed to push the limits and see how far Israel can go before eliciting any serious reaction.

The second consideration is, can Israeli military casualties be kept low enough that the Israeli public continues to support war? To deal with the latter, Israel uses airpower and artillery to destroy from a distance, and opened its ground invasion at night. Since it has long since dismantled Gaza's electricity infrastructure, its soldiers are the only ones who can see at night through their infrared goggles - Gaza's people, civilians and anyone who might want to try to defend them, are in complete darkness.

Israel's active military is estimated to be some 170,000. With universal conscription, it has some 2.4 million people between 17-49 years old fit for military service and everyone has had some training. Its military budget is 9% of its substantial GDP, totaling some \$18.7 billion. It receives about \$3 billion per year from the US. It has about 1000 main battle tanks, 1500 lower quality tanks, over 1000 artillery pieces, over 500 warplanes, about 200 helicopters, 13 warships, and 3 submarines. It has the latest unmanned aerial vehicles and can gather very precise intelligence using aerial photography and satellites.

Hamas is mainly a political organization, but it has an armed wing that has the capacity to improvise rockets and explosives and to train fighters with small arms. Hizbollah in Lebanon had some success against Israeli ground forces in 2006 partly because of armaments: they were able to destroy Israeli tanks with anti-tank missiles and fight against Israeli soldiers at night with night-vision goggles. Hamas almost certainly does not have access to such weaponry. In 2002, when Palestinian fighters defended Jenin from Israeli forces, they improvised some explosions but ran out of ammunition and supplies and were ultimately defeated when Israel leveled the central part of the camp with bulldozers.

Because calling it 'war' is basically metaphorical, the notion of a 'military casualty', as opposed to a civilian death, on the Palestinian side doesn't make much sense. If a soldier or even a militant is killed in battle, he is counted as a military casualty. If that same soldier is killed in his house by a missile from the sky or a shell from kilometres away, he is the victim of an assassination. If his entire family and various other people are killed because they were in his proximity, they are victims of murder. There are other words that can describe it, such as 'collateral damage', but murder is the most accurate, something that would be clear if racism against Palestinians were not so pervasive.

Israel invites us to dehumanize ourselves by estimating how many of its victims were 'militants' and how many 'civilians'. In this game, Israel claims everyone it has killed was a militant and those who were not are victims of the militants because they hide among civilians. The United Nations has accepted the broad parameters of the game, estimating at one point that one fifth of those killed were civilians. The details can then be quibbled over. But no one would accept this game if it were not Palestinians who were being killed. No one tries to divide the victims of Hamas's rockets or, in years past, suicide bombings. No doubt many of these were off-duty soldiers, since Israel has universal conscription. But everyone understands that these were civilians and killing them, a crime (an act of terrorism, no less). Most people understand that subdividing the young victims of a suicide bombing at a cafeteria based on whether they were active duty or reservist soldiers would be a pretty disgusting thing to do. But the same simple logic fails when attempted to extend it to Palestinians at a marketplace or school or hospital or university, all of whom are legitimate targets of murder unless proven otherwise (and Israel allows no one to see the evidence to prove anything in any case).

Though there is some uncertainty about Hamas's military capability, the invasion of Gaza will not likely be a replay of Lebanon 2006. Palestinians might be motivated and have little to lose, but they cannot compete with Israel's weaponry. Indeed, the reason the Israelis were surprised in Lebanon was that they had gotten used to fighting lightly armed and helpless opponents. Israel knows how to occupy Gaza. Before the 2005 'disengagement', their forces operated from fortified settlements and

cut Gaza in three parts, blocking the three main north-south roads with armor. They used extensive aerial surveillance and cameras from towers to watch every square inch of Gaza and snipe at people, including children, at will. They came out of their bases in massive armored force and with air support to bulldoze houses and neighbourhoods, after first using artillery and air strikes. Helicopter gunships would make short work of any lightly armed militants, who (unlike Hizbollah) have nothing capable of shooting one down. They can create their own no-go zones and minefields using cluster bombs, making even more of Gaza's tiny area uninhabitable - and making the concentration camp that much more concentrated.

If everything goes Israel's way, as it seems to be going, the next question is how Israel will decide if it has won. It can probably destroy many tunnels and, by occupying the area, silence the rockets. It can probably also conduct house-to-house searches and massacres, and will probably attempt to capture or kill the elected Hamas leadership. Since most countries refuse to recognize Hamas's government and many have accepted Israel's request that it be listed as a terrorist organization, there is nothing protecting these leaders' lives any more than the lives of the people who voted for them (or against them). With its soldiers back in Gaza, Israel will be able to return to its noble project of starving the Palestinian population, this time with an even more destroyed infrastructure and from up close. As Alex de Waal pointed out about Darfur, 'starve' is a transitive verb: it is something one people does to another.

P.S.

* From Justin Podur's ZSpace Page:

<http://www.zcommunications.org/znet...>

* Justin Podur is a Toronto-based writer. He was in Gaza in 2002. His blog is www.killingtrain.com.

Footnotes

[1] See: <http://www.imemc.org/>