

## Gaza: Salvation in a News Broadcast

By [Ramzy Baroud](#)

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When Gaza's electricity is in working order, most Palestinians in the impoverished and overcrowded Strip huddle around their television screens. It's neither "American Idol" nor "Dancing with the Stars" that brings them together. It's the news.

Gazans' relationship to news media is both complex and unique. Like most Palestinians everywhere, they intently watch and listen to news broadcasts the world over, with the hope that salvation will arrive in the form of a news bulletin. Evidently, salvation is yet to be aired.

That infatuation is hardly coincidental, however, as their purpose of reading, listening and watching is unmistakable. Palestinians deeply care about what the rest of the world is saying about their plight and struggle. Most importantly, they wonder if anyone out there cares.

During the first Intifada's long and harsh Israeli military curfews in Gaza, my family would gather around a small radio, always nervous that the batteries would die, leaving us with a total news blackout; a horrible scenario by Gaza's standards.

The Israeli army used to habitually cut off electricity and water for whatever refugee camp that was targeted for a crackdown. The practice persists to this day in Gaza, but on a much larger scale, where fuel is denied, food and medical supplies are alarmingly scarce, and water generators are in a pitiable state. So-called collective punishment has always been the pinnacle of Israel's policy towards the miserable Strip. Some things never change.

Regardless, somehow Gaza miraculously manages. The people of that tiny stretch of land find ways to cope with their ample tragedies, as they did the moment the first caravan of refugees, parched and desperate, made their way into Gaza following the 1948 Nakba. They weep for their loss, bury their dead, ask God for mercy, and, once again, return home to huddle around their radios, seeking a glimpse of hope in news broadcasts.

Today, their trust, or lack thereof in any news station depends largely on whether that particular station is committed to articulating their suffering and tragedy, as it is seen from their viewpoint, not that of an Israeli army's spokesperson; thus their love-hate relationship with major news networks like the BBC, Voice of America and others. Although most Palestinians in Gaza find Al-Jazeera network most understanding to their plight, they can never forgive it for providing a platform for Israeli government and army officials. Still, most Palestinians tune in to Al-Jazeera as a trustworthy outlet whenever tragedy strikes, and it often does.

News from Gaza and news about Gaza has hardly ever been as grim as it is these days. Every single day, there are statements attributed to UN officials and human rights

organisations, decrying the siege on Gaza, the strangulation of a whole population, and the deafening silence of the international community towards what is now perceived as the world's most pressing humanitarian catastrophe. Palestinians in Gaza listen ever intently. They hope, although apprehensively, that perhaps the United States will pressure Israel to ease its siege, to allow medical access for the terminally ill, to restore fuel supplies. Yet day after day, the situation worsens and little is done to rectify the injustice.

When international officials, such as UN Secretary-General Ban Ki- Moon or former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Mary Robinson call on Israel to ease or end the sanctions on Gaza, Gazans move a bit closer to their televisions. They insist on believing that Israel will eventually heed the calls, but always to no avail.

It was "almost unbelievable" that the world did not care about "a shocking violation of so many human rights" in Gaza, said Robinson, who is also former president of Ireland, as reported on the BBC 4 November. "Their whole civilisation has been destroyed, I'm not exaggerating," she said.

On that same day, Israel moved into Gaza with the intent of provoking a fight and ending the shaky truce with Hamas, which has largely held since June. The army killed six Palestinians and wounded three.

John Ging, director of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) in Gaza, told The Washington Post 15 November, "This is a disastrous situation, and it's getting worse and worse... It is unprecedented that the UN is unable to get its supplies in to a population under such obvious distress; many of these families have been subsisting on this ration for years, and they are living hand-to-mouth."

Since then, on 20 November, the same official reported that Israel reversed a decision to let 70 truckloads of humanitarian aid into the Gaza Strip.

Philip Luther of Amnesty International decried "Israel's latest tightening of its blockade [which] has made an already dire humanitarian situation markedly worse."

"Chronic malnutrition is on a steadily rising trend and micronutrient deficiencies are of great concern," said a leaked report by the Red Cross, as reported in The Independent. The report said that Israeli restrictions are causing "progressive deterioration in food security for up to 70 per cent of Gaza's population".

Gazans are still flipping through the channels and cranking the radio dials, left and right, as these calls continue to fall on deaf ears. They wonder why their plight is not treated with the same urgency as that of the Red Sea piracy or even that of eastern Congo, despite the fact that their misery has perpetuated for generations, and is worsening.

They also pass by Arabic channels and wonder about the seemingly never-ending party, while Gaza has been reduced to total desolation. They listen to Fatah and Hamas officials spewing insults and fighting over government positions that don't exist and territories that hold no sovereignty. They shake their heads in dismay and carry on, for perhaps tomorrow will bring with it some good news — for once.

*Ramzy Baroud ([www.ramzybaroud.net](http://www.ramzybaroud.net)) is an author and editor of PalestineChronicle.com. His work has been published in many newspapers, journals and anthologies around the world. His latest book is The Second Palestinian Intifada: A Chronicle of a People's Struggle*

(Pluto Press, London).

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