

## Gaza under Siege

Interview with documentary film maker and journalist Harry Fear

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*"The idea is to put the Palestinians on a diet, but not to make them die of hunger." Dov Weissglass, advisor to the Israeli Prime Minister in 2006*

In 2005 Israel withdrew its settlers from Gaza. Following this there were democratic elections which Hamas won. Since voting the "wrong way" the Palestinian people of Gaza have been subjected to a siege by Israel. The Palestinian people of Gaza are blockaded by land, sea and air by the Israeli Defence Force.

The EU and America have failed to do anything to stop Israel's war against the Palestinians of Gaza. Most notable were the massive military attacks of December-January 2008-9 which killed 1,500 Palestinians and the most recent attack of November 2012 which resulted in nearly 200 deaths.

The International Red Cross and the United Nations have found the Israeli government's siege of Gaza to be illegal under international law.

In September 2011 [five independent UN rights experts](#) made a report to the UN Human Rights Council which said that Israel's siege of Gaza amounted to collective punishment of the Palestinian people and was a ["flagrant contravention of international human rights and humanitarian law"](#) under the Fourth Geneva Convention. As [Noam Chomsky](#) has pointed out the Gaza Strip is the world's largest open air prison. In October 2012 Professor Chomsky said:

*"The siege is a criminal act that has no justification. It should be broken and it should be strongly opposed by the outside world. It's simply an effort to intimidate the Gazans into self-destruction, to try to get rid of them and destroy the society. There is absolutely no justification for it — military justifications are claimed but they have no credibility."*

Israel's blockade of Gaza is denying the Palestinian people access to medical supplies and food. Hospitals face critical shortages, with 40% of all essential medicines at zero stock level. Out of the 1.7 million Palestinians living in Gaza 54% are food insecure including 428,000 children.

Israel's illegal blockade has led to a massive shortage of building materials to repair the homes, hospitals, schools and water/sanitation infrastructure that have been destroyed/damaged by the IDF in the last 5 years. Most of Gaza's water supplies are

polluted and unsafe to drink. Meanwhile there are power cuts every day.

I spoke to documentary film maker and journalist [Harry Fear](#) who is based in Gaza and has reported extensively on the siege of Gaza over the last few years.

Chomsky has called the Gaza Strip the "world's largest prison". Would you agree with this description?

I would largely agree with Chomsky's description. I've found, though, that quite a few of those sympathetic with Palestinians don't actually know that the Gaza Strip has a border with Egypt, and that Egypt is also largely responsible for the imprisonment ('security besiegement') policy. Civilian traffic out of Gaza into Israel is basically a no-no, while leaving into Egypt is diplomatically difficult and unaffordable for most Palestinians. I think the most important aspect of the siege, though, is the economic blockade. The Egyptian border with Gaza is closed to almost all economic traffic —only recently have the Egyptians allowed construction materials to be imported into Gaza. Palestinians want and need economic independence (not aid dependency), and I haven't met any Palestinians who want to leave Gaza for any reason other than the poor economic opportunities there (prolonged by the deliberately-punishing siege). My on-the-ground experience in Gaza has made me realise that there is a real psychological sense of imprisonment and worldly isolation as a result of the siege, which affects widespread depression and eats away at people's hope and the future prospects for prosperity. 'Free Gaza!' should remain the mantra, so long as this illegal solitary confinement policy continues. Incidentally, the besiegement policy proves that Israel (and Egypt) are the dominating external powers, and that the Palestinians are not in a symmetrical conflict or battle with Israel, but are the persecuted party. The government in Gaza can't do anything to lift the siege, only help alleviate it by facilitating the underground smuggling tunnels into Egypt.

Since the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza in 2005 the IDF has launched two massive military assaults upon Gaza. What effect/impact have these had upon Gazan society?

Although I wasn't present during the winter '08-'09 assault, I believe the affects of these military operations on Gaza have of course been grave and multidimensional. At a psychological and spiritual level the resolve and will of the Palestinian people has been tested by most cruel and barbaric aggressions, launched by one of the most powerful militaries in the world, resulting in the 'collateral damage' massacring of hundreds. With around one in a thousand Palestinians in Gaza wiped of the map during that 22-day assault, every family and street has been touched by terror and tragedy. Similarly, during this winter (11/2012), the 8-day operation hit every area of Gaza and once again no civilian was really safe during those bloody days. Without meaning to deliberately romanticise or objectify Palestinians, it's absolutely important to note the unimaginable resilience (including moral resilience) of Palestinians in the face of such barbarity. Some of my closest friends in Gaza volunteered at hospitals during Operation Cast Lead and had to carry dying and dead children through bombed streets, but you wouldn't know it or guess it from their political stances. I ask myself: would the British people react in a relatively restrained manner to aggressions of these sorts? I can't imagine so. Interviewing Hamas spokespeople you notice that they often mention their policy desire to perpetuate the steadfastness of their people. That's a striking policy goal and one that shows that the Palestinian steadfastness is something tangible, remarkable, and fundamental in the conflict with Israel. That steadfastness has been tested. At a physical and political level, massive civilian infrastructural damage and damage to civilian administrative capacity was done during both

recent operations. Neither operations have of course been able to stop militant groups from producing home-made rockets, including rockets that can reach 75km away from the Strip. Israel's operations have tried to prove a terror deterrence to the subjugated Palestinians, but Palestinians resolve hasn't been broken.

What impact has the Israeli siege of Gaza had upon the living standards of ordinary Palestinians?

The siege has explicitly destroyed serious economic prospects for Palestinians. Most Palestinians are living in relative poverty, relying on food aid for support. While unemployment is over 50%, most Palestinians are living in refugee camps, awaiting economic freedom to improve their living conditions. Population centres in Gaza constitute some of the most over-crowded and densely-populated residential areas in the world. At the same time there is quite pronounced inequality in the Strip, as the main city (historic Gaza City) is strikingly developed in comparison to other areas of the Strip. What's clear is that Palestinians have used all means at their disposal to attempt development, by relying mostly on smuggling tunnels with Egypt for imports, proving determination and resourcefulness, as well as Gaza's economic capacity if it were free.

Medical Aid for Palestinians has criticised the siege of Gaza for the terrible impact upon its health service. How is the siege affecting the medical services available to people in Gaza?

Of course the health services do their best under the circumstances. Limitations include lack of medicines, basic medical equipments and advanced technology that we take for granted in developed countries. Aid efforts and convoys have delivered some alleviation, but there is too far left to go.

How has the siege affected the education of children in Gaza?

The worsened economic situation seems to have driven Palestinians to a stronger determination for academic excellence, rather than having had a demoralising effect. Although there are thousands too few school places, a lack of basic texts and (some way) poor teaching altogether, there are several universities in Gaza of excellent standards whose students' determination and skill is incredible.

Following the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza in 2005 the people of Gaza voted the "wrong way" by electing Hamas to office. Why do you think Western governments have such a hostile attitude towards Palestinian resistance to Israeli repression?

Since the media strips away the historical and practical context in which this desperate and weak Palestinian armed resistance is borne, then of course one sees only 'terrorist crazies' in Gaza, perpetuating the dangerous common stereotypes. For powerful and dominant Western governments it's far easier to simply go along with the Israeli terms of reference than confront them in a just and reasoned way. So the Western position is almost identical to the Israeli position. Hamas' armed resistance (in response to Israeli state terrorism) is of course considered as (private) terrorism by American and British governments, who are themselves used to dealing with and labelling resistance efforts in such a way (think of their own adventures in Iraq and Afghanistan). Meanwhile, as 'we' are unused to being occupied and resisting occupation, there is automatically an ideological dissimilarity and natural sympathy deficit with the Palestinian position.

Thousands of Palestinians have been killed and injured by the IDF since 2005. Do you think that ordinary Palestinians have the right to defend themselves against military attack?

Palestinians have a legal, moral and abrahamic religious rights to self-defence, including explicit and direct armed resistance. However Palestinians do not have the legal right to target Israeli civilians, any more than the Israeli military had the right to kill 61 Palestinian children last winter. Unguided rocket fire from Gaza is legally and morally problematic. The military thinking is that Palestinian retaliatory rocket fire that terrorises Israeli civilians could be successful in scaring off and preventing Israeli state terrorism, and it has indeed been somewhat successful in 'rebalancing the terror threat'. However, one has to take a macro perspective: Palestinians in Gaza are contained behind walls, fences and no-go zones, with little opportunities to attack Israeli military units or installations. Meanwhile in the West Bank, the opposite is the case, but Palestinians don't have weapons (only stones) to resist with. If we were (hypothetically) to see widespread Intifada-style mass popular resistance to Israeli occupation, I think that would be monumental in knocking into place the last nail of the coffin of Israeli occupation. The international community is moved by occupation, suffering, and organised resistance, and needs to see it to forcefully externally intervene, use its power and enforce the law.

Whenever rockets are fired from Gaza into Israel the UK government is quick to condemn such acts as terrorism. The historian Illan Pappé has noted that the far more important issue is Israeli violence against the Gaza Strip. How would you characterize Israeli acts of violence against the Gaza Strip?

Living through the recent 8-day aggression confirmed my previous analysis that Israel's violent adventures in Gaza constitute illegal, disproportionate and reckless military engagements, resulting in blatant state terrorism and inevitable massacring. In the last couple of years it's been the case that Israel's attacks have largely been targeted (although sometimes the targeting is erroneous). The key to understanding the state violence is to see that Israel is willing to use incredible and ridiculous force, inevitably invoking massive civilian 'collateral damage', in order to kill a suspected militant or two. Palestinian blood is cheap. Who cares? The mainstream media certainly doesn't.

More and more activists from around the world are taking solidarity action such as the Aid to Gaza convoys or visiting the West Bank to help with the olive harvest. Can you tell us more about your initiative to take media activists to Gaza this summer?

I'm taking a few dozen media workers and media students to Gaza in July for a solidarity and media-making mission to stimulate improved journalistic coverage on, understanding of and compassion towards Gaza. From 18 countries around the world, the media convoy members will congregate in Cairo and then complete an intense two-week programme of immersion and media work in Gaza. The participants were carefully chosen by a team in Gaza, based on their education, skills and experience, as well as their willingness to follow-up the trip with awareness-building work when they return home. I have tried to reinvent the convoy model, moving away from a model of pit-stop visiting of war sites, institutes and then plush hotels, to a model that's more intense, embedded, realistic and hopefully more socially constructive.

You can help beat the blockade and get food to malnourished children in Gaza by making a donation to Medical Aid for Palestinians special appeal at:

<http://www.justgiving.com/MAP-Feed-the-children-of-Gaza-appeal>

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