

Israeli artillery strikes on the Gaza Strip: Missing the Point and the Target

Apathy for the loss of innocent Palestinian life in the US media

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The recent Israeli artillery strikes on the Gaza Strip have outraged Palestinians, raised eyebrows in the international community, prompted condemnation from human rights organizations, and put the Israeli government on the defensive. One thing is certain: the loss of innocent Palestinian life in Israeli attacks has been the rule rather than the exception.

Since the start of the month, Israeli forces have killed nearly 50 Palestinians, the majority of them being innocent civilians. In May, the killing of more than 40 Palestinians by Israeli forces was scarcely reported in the US media. The recent artillery barrage on Gaza left many children under the age of ten dead. The number of Palestinian children killed in the last three weeks by Israeli forces is equal to the number of Israeli children killed by Palestinian groups over the past two years. Palestinian rocket fire, which has put Israeli towns in the Negev such as Sderot “under siege,” rarely wounds civilians or causes deaths. According to the Israeli Ministry of Foreign affairs, Palestinian rocket fire killed seven Israeli civilians in the last three years. These attacks, however, are futile, counterproductive and only strengthen Israel’s excuse to rein terror on the Palestinian population.

The killing on June 20 follows the liquidation of three children on June 19. Although extrajudicial assassinations (which kill many innocent civilians and frequently miss the target) are against international law, Israel has continued this policy with virtual impunity. The Israeli newspaper, Haaretz, reported comments made by Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, “The lives and the welfare of the residents of the Sderot are more important than those of the residents of Gaza.” One could argue, however, that the excessive and disproportionate bombardment of Gaza puts the protection of Israeli Jews in jeopardy by unnecessarily fanning the flames of the conflict. While every nation has the right to protect its citizens, the disregard for the safety of innocent civilians is unconscionable. Firing on a crowded city, marketplace or beach does not constitute precision or the value of innocent life, as Olmert makes clear in his comments.

The apathy for the loss of innocent Palestinian life continues in the US media. On June 20, *CNN.com*, *Yahoo*, and the online edition of *The New York Times* did not report the killing of a woman and one her relatives in her home on the front page of their respective publication. The BBC, *Le Monde*, Haaretz and most online news sites based outside the US did cover the killing on their front page. Media bias pertaining to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict is not a new occurrence. In March, I discussed a study by *If Americans Knew*:

“In 2004, *If Americans Knew*—an American organization that exposes and

examines the facts of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict—reported that 808 Palestinian conflict deaths occurred while 107 Israelis conflict deaths occurred. The study, however, found that The New York Times covered Israeli deaths in the headline or the first paragraph in 159 articles—meaning in some cases they covered the same death numerous times. In contrast, The New York Times only covered about 40 percent of Palestinian deaths—334 of 808—in the headline or in the first paragraph of the articles. Nearly eight Palestinians died for every one Israeli.”

Unfortunately, *The New York Times* is one of the more liberal and “fair and balanced” of the outlets.

Onlookers in the West should not be surprised by the recent Israeli assault. Although the initial coverage of the killing of the family members picnicking on a Gaza beach two weeks ago was PR disaster for the Israeli military and government—both tried to spin the bad press and cover up the situation. While the first proclamation by the Israeli government was an apology for the killings, the Israel Occupation Force (IOF) backed off from the initial account attributing blame to the Israeli Air Force. The IOF, after an “investigation” that concealed the evidence it was using, said that the deaths were caused by a mine planted by Hamas. The mine theory was passed off to the media as fact, without any evidence to back up the claim. The IOF finally admitted that the deaths could have been caused by an old Israeli shell that was at the beach site. Palestinian medics, human rights groups and bystanders at the site corroborated the initial evidence—that the deaths were caused by an Israeli shell. Nonetheless, every major US media outlet covered the story, including *CNN*, *The New York Times* and most of the other outlets that “forgot” to cover the latest liquidation of Palestinian civilians.

Historically, Israel (including Labor, Likud and Kadima) has instituted a method of slow ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian people. This strategy, however, was only effective when combined with the appearance of Israel having the moral upper hand. A PR victory would ensure the notion that Israel acted in self-defense. This methodology continues today. Americans should know better than anyone else that the truth rarely matters (i.e. weapons of mass destruction in Iraq); rather it is how an event is presented or spun. Over the last five years, nearly 4,000 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli forces while more than 30,000 have been injured—the majority of them being unarmed civilians. Israel has known for sometime that it can continue its policies under the radar as long as the attacks do not become “newsworthy.” Tanya Reinhart addressed this issue in her book *Israel/Palestine: How to End the War of 1948*, in which she stated,

“The reason for this strategy is clear: Massive numbers of Palestinians killed every day cannot go unnoticed by even the most cooperative Western Media and governments. [Former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud] Barak was explicit about this. ‘The prime minister said that were there not 140 Palestinian casualties at this point, but rather 400 or 1,000, this...would perhaps damage Israel a great deal.’¹ Apparently, he believed that with a stable average of five casualties a day, Israel could continue undamaged in the media, as, in fact, it has.”

The implementation of this course of action has reinforced Israel’s position of victimization; as attacks on Palestinians go unreported, attacks on Israel are extensively covered. This policy further shields Israel from criticism regarding its action of Judaizing Jerusalem, appropriating Palestinian land, strangulating the Palestinian economy and securing the

matrix of control over the Occupied Territories. When Israel has been criticized, it has habitually played the security card. For example, Israel's construction of the Apartheid Wall has not been limited to the internationally recognized 1967 borders; rather its invasive route usurps Palestinian land and resources well beyond the Green line. If the Apartheid Wall was for security purposes only, Israel could easily build the monstrous barrier on the internationally recognized border. This does not even address the ruling by the International Court of Justice, which deemed the Wall illegal, or the Shin Bet's (Israel's internal security service) assertion that the Wall is not a significant mechanism in reducing attacks on Israel.

The killings in Gaza over the last three weeks have sparked verbal condemnation from the UN, while the IOF chief issued a probe concerning the latest string of civilian deaths. A couple weeks will pass however, more Palestinian civilians will be killed, and the words of discontentment from UN will not bring justice. Theoretically, the UN could pass a resolution chiding Israel's latest strikes in Gaza, but the US, as a member state with veto power, would no doubt exercise its right to reject the resolution to protect its ally, Israel. The probe of the IOF will attribute the strike to "miscalculations" and the "unfortunate" and "non-deliberate" costs of fighting a war against "terrorists." But this rhetoric is becoming obvious and old—at some juncture international law and the protection of human rights must be applied.

The focus of media attention will go back to Israeli Prime Minister Olmert's convergence plan, internal fighting between Hamas and Fatah, and Israel's quest to find a "partner for peace." The media will all but forget Hamas' call for a renewed cease-fire, Hamas' persistent moderation, and the "diet" Palestinians have been put on by Israel and the international community. The closing of the Rafah border, which used to make headlines, has become the status quo in Gaza. The closing furthers malnutrition among children, hunger throughout the general population, depletion in wages, a spike in unemployment, and a severe reduction in trade. Israel's creation of unilateral facts on the ground in the West Bank and East Jerusalem will forge on. This is the world Palestinians live in. Most appallingly, it is the world the international community has created for them.

1 *Jerusalem Post*, October 20, 2000.

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