

Israeli assault injures 1.5 million Gazans

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This week the death toll in Gaza passed the 1,000 mark, after nearly three weeks of Israeli air and ground attacks. But surprisingly, no one has reported an even more appalling statistic: that there are some 1.5 million injured Palestinians in Gaza. How is it possible that such an astounding figure could have passed the world's media by?

The reason apparently is that they have been relying on the highly unreliable statistics provided by official Palestinian sources. It appears that the Palestinian health ministry only records as wounded those Gazans who need to stay in hospital because of the severity of their injuries.

That means they only count the more than 4,500 Gazans who have suffered injuries such as severe burns from exploding Israeli phosphorus shells; shrapnel wounds from artillery rounds; broken or lost limbs from aerial bombardment; bullet wounds; physical trauma from falling building debris; and so on.

But in fact there is another, far more reasonable standard for assessing those injured, one that provides the far higher total of 1.5 million Gazans – or every surviving Palestinian in Gaza. The measure I am referring to is the one employed by Israel.

Here is an example of its use. In September 2007, the international media reported that 69 Israeli soldiers had been wounded when Palestinian militants fired a rocket into the Zikim army base near the Gaza Strip. The rocket struck a tent where the soldiers were sleeping.

It is worth noting the details of the attack. Israeli officials related that, of the 69 wounded, 11 had moderate or severe injuries and one was critically injured. A few more had light wounds. The rest, probably 50 or more, were injured in the sense that they were suffering from shock.

So, if we apply the same standard to Gaza, that would mean 1.5 million Gazans have been wounded. Or is there still some doubt about whether the weeks of bombardment of Gaza, one of the most densely populated places on earth, have left the entire civilian population in a deep, and possibly permanent, state of shock?

Talking of Gaza's civilians, where did they all go? Israel's so-called "war" on Gaza must be the first example in human history of a conflict where there are apparently no civilians. Or, at least, that is the impression being created by the world's leading international bodies, from the World Health Organisation to the United Nations. Instead they refer to a new

category of “women and children”.

Thus, those 1,000-plus dead Gazans are broken down into percentages defined in terms of “women and children” and the rest. The earliest figures stated that about 25 per cent of Gaza’s dead were “women and children”, and that has steadily climbed close to the 50 per cent mark since Israel’s ground invasion got under way.

The implication – one with which Israel is presumably delighted – is that the rest are Palestinian fighters, or “terrorists” as Israel would prefer us to call them. It also suggests that every man in Gaza over the age of 16 is being defined as a non-civilian – as a combatant and, again by implication, as a terrorist. In short, all Gaza’s men are legitimate targets for Israeli attack.

This is not very far from the position recently attributed to Israeli policymakers by the daily Jerusalem Post. The newspaper reported that officials had come to the view that “it would be pointless for Israel to topple Hamas because the population [of Gaza] is Hamas”.

On this thinking, Israel is at war with every single man, woman and child in Gaza, which is very much how it looks. Maybe we should be glad that the category of “women and children” is still being recognised – at least, for now.

The myths about the blockade of Gaza are so legion it is almost impossible to disentangle them. But let’s try tackling a few.

The first is that the blockade was a necessary response to the election of Hamas.

Tell that to John Wolfensohn, special envoy to the Quartet, comprising the US, UN, Europe and Russia, from May 2005. His job was to oversee the disengagement. Wolfensohn was succeeded by the far less principled Tony Blair, the former British prime minister.

In an interview with the Haaretz newspaper in 2007, Wolfensohn explained why he had resigned a year into his job, in April 2006. Shortly after the disengagement in summer 2005, he said, Israel and the US had violated the understandings made to ensure the border crossings into Gaza remained open after the Jewish settlers left. “Every aspect of that agreement was abrogated,” he said.

The economy collapsed as a result, as Gaza’s farmers saw their produce rot at the crossings, and unemployment and disillusionment among Gazans rocketed. “Instead of hope, the Palestinians saw that they were put back in prison. And with 50 per cent unemployment, you would have conflict.”

It was the closure of the crossings that Wolfensohn believes partly explains Hamas’ success in the subsequent elections, in early 2006. So, according to Wolfensohn, Israel’s blockade pre-existed Hamas’ rise to power and began when Fatah were still the rulers of Gaza.

The second myth is that the blockade was an attempt, if a futile one, to get Hamas to recognise Israel’s “right to exist”.

Tell that to Dov Weisglass, former prime minister Ariel Sharon's fixer in Washington. It was he who suggested the true goal of the blockade, which Israel intensified immediately following Hamas' electoral triumph. The policy would be "like an appointment with a dietician. The Palestinians will get a lot thinner, but won't die."

In short, according to Weisglass, Israeli policy in Gaza was "collective punishment" inflicted on the civilian population for choosing Hamas – a policy that, should it need pointing out, is a grave violation of international law and a war crime.

The hope, it seems, was that Gazans would, as they sank into abject poverty, manage to summon up the energy to overthrow Hamas. It didn't happen.

The third myth is that the blockade was designed to put pressure on Hamas to end the rocket fire into Israel.

Tell that to Ehud Barak, the defence minister, and Matan Vilnai, his deputy. This pair were plotting an invasion of Gaza throughout the six-month ceasefire with Hamas, and in fact much earlier.

In truth, they ignored every diplomatic overture from Hamas, including offers of indefinite truces, while they invested their energies in the coming ground invasion. In particular they worked on plans, noted in the Israeli media back in spring 2008, to "level" Gaza's civilian neighbourhoods and create "combat zones" from which civilians could be expelled.

One aspect of the blockade that seems to have been overlooked is the way it has been used to "soften up" Gaza, and Hamas, before Israel's attack. For three years Gaza's population has been denied food, medicines and fuel.

Every general knows it is easier to fight an army – or militia – that is cold, tired and hungry. Could there be a better description of the Hamas fighters, as well as those "women and children", currently facing Israel's tanks and warplanes?

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