

Israeli Attack on Gaza Was “Massive State Terror”: Former UN Official Richard Falk

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As a brutal winter storm hits [Gaza](#), where tens of thousands of Palestinians [remain without proper shelter after Israel’s summer attacks](#), a former United Nations official warns of a “humanitarian emergency of the highest order.”

“The evidence seems overwhelming as to the commission of massive war crimes,” former UN special rapporteur [Richard Falk](#) told The Electronic Intifada.

Yet justice is as out of reach for Palestinians in Gaza as relief from the dire humanitarian situation there.

(Transcript below)

The Ma’an News Agency [reported](#) today that a two-month-old infant near Khan Younis in southern Gaza died in her family’s home, damaged by Israel, as a result of the freezing cold. The baby, Rafah Ali Abu Assi, and her family “reportedly continued living in their damaged home despite the destruction.”



“Due to lack of alternative shelter, many of the nearly 110,000 Palestinians left homeless by Israeli bombardment have done the same, including many living in just tents ... The situation is aggravated by the lack of fuel for electric power, meaning that power is available roughly eight hours a day, with occasional cuts on top of that,” Ma’an added.

Gaza’s sole power station was bombed by Israel during the [summer attacks](#), and fuel is scarce as the Israeli-Egyptian siege on Gaza continues for an eighth year. Last weekend, [two Palestinian teenagers died](#) in a house fire reportedly started by candles the family were using during power cuts.

Also in southern Gaza on Friday, hundreds of Palestinians were forced to evacuate their

homes because of flooding, Ma'an [reported](#). Many of them are living in temporary housing shelters or “uninhabitable” homes destroyed by Israeli bombings.

“Massive state terror”



Richard Falk, the former United Nations official, says that the aftermath of Israel’s summer attacks — which he regards “as a form of massive state terror directed at the entire population of Gaza” — is no less than “catastrophic.”

Falk is the author of the recently published book [Palestine: The Legitimacy of Hope](#). Speaking to The Electronic Intifada in Berkeley last month, Falk talked about Israel’s attacks on Gaza last summer and gave his analysis of the Palestinian liberation struggle.

Transcript of interview with Richard Falk

Nora Barrows-Friedman: Let’s begin by talking about Gaza — reconstruction has still yet to begin, tens of thousands of people are sheltering as best they can through these harsh winter months, and infrastructure is still in need of basic reconstruction as well. During Operation Cast Lead in 2008-09, you called Israel’s sealing of the exit points around Gaza “a new kind of war crime,” as people were unable to flee the violence meted out by Israel, and it was repeated again over the summer.

Give us your assessment, from your perspective as a longtime scholar and analyst on Palestine, to what we saw over the summer and what we see now.

Richard Falk: Well, I think what we see now is a humanitarian emergency of the highest order, which is worse than normal humanitarian emergencies because it comes after this catastrophic attack of the summer, which I regard as a form of massive state terror directed at the entire population of Gaza.

One shouldn’t measure the human loss just by the [number of] people killed and wounded; the entire population was subject to this terroristic warfare. And from what I’ve heard, as many as 425,000 children in Gaza are needing treatment for severe stress. So one needs to grasp the magnitude of this occurrence which really has to be viewed, in my opinion, as an atrocity of the first order.

NBF: Our contributor, Patrick O. Strickland, [reported](#) that “During and after the military offensive, Israel and Egypt have denied human rights groups, including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, as well as UN investigators, access to Gaza,”

including your successor at the UN as well, to conduct research into probable war crimes. What can be done in terms of holding Israel accountable if it's refusing to be transparent?

RF: Well, it's, of course, understandable from Israel's point of view that it would like to suppress this story to the extent that it can. The Human Rights Council appointed a commission of inquiry headed by William Schabas, a well-respected international criminal law professor. Whether they follow the same route that the Goldstone report followed back in 2009 is not clear yet, but it's a high-quality commission, and the evidence seems overwhelming as to the commission of massive war crimes.

So one hopes that it will produce an authoritative report that will be accepted — [even though it will] then probably blocked by the US using what I call it's geo-political veto, which in a way is more sinister than the constitutional veto, because it's done behind closed doors without acknowledgment, without debate, but it successfully prevents the UN from any kind of behavioral follow-up to its symbolic delegitimation of what Israel did in the summer.

NBF: And meanwhile, international civil society is gaining more and more momentum, especially since the summer attacks, in terms of growing the boycott, divestment and sanctions campaigns either on college campuses or around local communities. Can you talk about the role that civil society plays now, as international bodies including the UN continue to be unable to hold Israel accountable themselves?

RF: I think the growth of the civil society role is a combination of the moral outrage associated with the kinds of experiences that were associated with the Gaza attacks combined with the discrediting of the Oslo diplomatic approach, the collapse of the Kerry talks, the sense that Israel has been gaining while Palestine loses through this indefinite delay of any kind of meaningful developments. The settlements have expanded, the separation wall was built, the settler-only roads have been constructed. So it's a kind of land-grabbing facilitated by a diplomatic process that excluded the relevance of international law from the negotiations.

So in this discrediting of diplomacy, the turn by the Palestinians to nonviolence and the growth of the global civil society movement is a new reality, I think, in the Palestinian struggle. And it's impressively expanding, especially in Europe, but here in America also. And I think the hope that Palestinians have at this point is very much tied to the shift in leadership from the people in Ramallah to the people who are representing the Palestinians in civil society.

NBF: Richard, talk about your book, *Palestine: The Legitimacy of Hope* — what it's about, and what compelled you to write it at this point?



RF: Well, it represents my thinking about the conflict over these past six years, partly the experience I had at the UN, and partly as someone who was trying to comment on the developments through a blog that I maintained with some consistency. The real argument of the book is the unacknowledged turn to nonviolence by the Palestinians, including Hamas, and a kind of inquiry into why the media has failed to note this shift, and some of the brave undertakings by Palestinians through hunger strikes and other forms of nonviolent resistance.

It's a very, I think, important progression in the Palestinian struggle, which started out in its early phase with reliance on the Arab neighbors to liberate Palestine, and then shifted for a period to armed struggle. And in between these two phases, relied on the UN and the international community, because it passed these resolutions that confirmed the legitimacy of Palestinian grievances, but nothing happened. And then came the diplomacy, and now this new phase that in my wildest dreams will eventuate in what I call a global intifada.

NBF: Talk more about that, what would that look like?

RF: Well, it really would look like a dramatic intensification of what's already happening, but it would create the impression that there was a popular mobilization that was creating such a new reality that the Israeli leadership would have to recalculate its own interests — which is what I interpret happened in South Africa. It wasn't a sudden moral transformation of this racist leadership, it was the feeling that they would be better off coming to terms with the opposition and allowing a multi-racial constitutional democracy to emerge than they would maintaining the apartheid structure.

Israel, in one way, has an easier path, because the white elite in South Africa was faced with a five to one African majority. Israel would probably be close to parity in terms of population, and because it has such a stranglehold on the economy and the diplomatic infrastructure of world politics, that the danger for the Palestinians would be that such a transformation would just replicate, in another form, the present kinds of Israeli domination.

Why I use the word “hope” and the discourse of hope is that the situation is uncertain enough in relation to the future to create the moral and political foundation for being committed to the struggle. And that’s the most that we can achieve, to be optimistic about the Palestinian prospects is to pretend a knowledge that we can’t really possess.

What we can say is that most of the struggles since the end of World War II have, in the end, been won by the side that controls the moral and legal argument — not the side that has the better military capability. All the anti-colonial wars were won by the weaker side, militarily. And the United States should have learned this lesson in Vietnam itself, where it completely dominated the military dimensions of the conflict, and yet lost the war. The Afghans say “you have the watches, we have the time,” which is a way of expressing the perseverance of a struggle on the part of people who have everything to lose by surrendering, and the opposite side, the dominating or oppressive side, has a lot to gain by compromising.

If you analyze it in that way, there is I think solid reason to be hopeful enough to stay engaged in the struggle.

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