

Unrestrained Israeli Crimes Against Media Outlets and Palestinian Civilians

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Israel's demolition of a 12-storey tower block in Gaza, housing the US Associated Press (AP) news agency and Qatar's Al Jazeera, forced the Biden administration to call for, at least some restraint in the aerial bombardment that has targeted other multi-storey buildings in the beleaguered Strip and killed dozens of Palestinian civilians. Israel's tactic is to warn inhabitants of buildings to be taken down before missiles strike so they have time to get to safety while their possessions are blown to bits.

During a phone call to Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu, US President Joe Biden reiterated his support for “Israel’s right to self-defence”, condemned Hamas’ rocket attacks on Israeli cities and towns, and expressed concern over the deaths of “Israeli and Palestinian civilians” and the safety of journalists. Later, White House press secretary Jen Psaki tweeted that the Biden administration has “communicated to the Israelis that ensuring the safety and security of journalists and independent media is a paramount responsibility”. That is: Rather than the safety and security of Palestinian and international civilians living in Gaza.

Little wonder that after speaking to Biden, Netanyahu concluded he had a green light to proceed with its offensive and announced that Israel would carry on unhindered with its air, land and sea offensive against Gaza, eliciting Hamas’ response in flights of rockets from Gaza.

The AP, the main US global agency, had been based in the Jalaa tower for 15 turbulent years, including during Israel’s 2008-09 and 2014 all-out onslaughts on Gaza. Both the Associated Press and Al Jazeera chose this building because its height and location had given journalists an overall view of activity in the air and events on the ground during brief eruptions of violence and full-scale warfare.

AP chief Gary Pruitt pointed out, “The world will know less about what is happening in Gaza because of what happened ...We are shocked and horrified that the Israeli military would target and destroy the building housing AP’s bureau and other news organisations in Gaza.” He also argued that during the time AP was operating from the building, the agency did not believe, as Israel claimed as its pretext for the strikes, there were Hamas military or intelligence operatives based there.

Whether or not this is a false pretext, Israel is guilty of a war crime. According to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), targeting a purely “civilian object” is prohibited and “civilian objects must not be attacked unless they have become military objectives”.

Furthermore, the ICRC says when military objectives are targeted, civilians and civilian “objects” must be spared collateral damage as far as possible and damage must not be excessive when assessing the military advantage gained by striking a specific target. “Such use of excessive force quite clearly violates the law of armed conflict and is a war crime,” states the ICRC. Indeed, it says carrying out mass disproportionate attacks — like those perpetrated in Israel’s earlier and latest campaigns against Gaza — is a war crime.

Several legal experts argue that targeting journalists is in itself a war crime while Joel Simon, executive director of the Committee to Protect Journalists, said this attack “raises the spectre that the Israel Defence Forces [IDF] is deliberately targeting media facilities in order to disrupt coverage of the human suffering in Gaza”.

Pruitt, who received a call from Secretary of State Antony Blinken on the targeting of AP, should not have been shocked and horrified at the action of the Israeli military. The building was struck precisely because journalists there were reporting in real time what is happening in Gaza. Israel’s actions in this conflict do not polish Israel’s image and Israel cares a great deal about its image abroad, notably in the US and Europe. It has slavishly followed the US example by saying Israel has the right to defend itself but does not grant that right to Palestinians.

The other news organisations housed in the destroyed building included the photographer of Middle East Eye, a London-based website dealing with regional affairs. News organisations and journalists tend to clump together in front line areas like Gaza for safety and the need to cooperate in the event of power cuts, internet loss, or satellite outage.

Lone correspondents and independent stringers working for several outlets would have thought Israel would not bring down a block hosting AP, in particular, and would choose to its building for their offices. The loss of equipment could deprive them of the means to carry out their profession. Israel gave the residents of the tower one hour to evacuate and refused to grant journalists an extra 10 minutes to shift some of their remaining equipment. Nothing has been said about the equipment and records in the other offices in Al Jalaa tower or the household furnishings and possessions of residents. They do not count as they are, presumably, Palestinians.

Israel has never had any regard for journalists who expose its nefarious activities and brutal actions. Therefore, collapsing a tower block hosting journalists in Gaza is a good way to disrupt their reports and curb their opportunities to collect information.

The fact that an all too brief hullabaloo has been made over the destruction of Al Jalaa building on May 15th is only due to the presence of the AP offices there. Western double standards, nearly always applied to reporting events in this region, apply once again.

Israel’s demolition of two other high rises, Al Jawhara and Al Shorouk buildings, on May 11th and 12th, where journalists were also based, received little or no attention. Residents were told to evacuate Al Jawhara by text message and two warning shots were fired at Al Shorouk before Israel’s missiles were fired. The BBC reported that there had been “civilian deaths” in

the former strike. Journalists housed in these two buildings reported for Arab outlets unfriendly to Israel. Its pretext was the same as for Al Jalaa tower.

On the demolition of these two buildings, the Committee to Protect Journalists' Middle East and North Africa representative, Ignacio Miguel Delgado, declared, "It is utterly unacceptable for Israel to bomb and destroy the offices of media outlets and endanger the lives of journalists, especially since Israeli authorities know where those media outlets are housed... [The] Israeli authorities must ensure that journalists can do their jobs safely without fear of being injured or killed."

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