

The Israeli Assault on Gaza 2008-09 (“Operation Cast Lead”)

I. Watch *One Family in Gaza*, a 23 minute film by Jen Marlowe. The DVD is in the trunk or you can go online to <http://vimeo.com/18384109> and play the film directly from there.

In the film, a family recounts what it was like when Israeli soldiers attacked them. One son was killed, the mother and father were both injured, and their house was demolished. For two years they had to live in a tent. Although they live in desperate circumstances, the family is not overcome with despair. This becomes clear as the family tells of all the ways that they remember Ibrahim and asks questions like: “How can I build a family void of violence?” As the filmmaker says: “Palestinians in Gaza are depicted either as violent terrorists or as helpless victims. The Awajah family challenges both portrayals. Through one family’s story, the larger tragedy of Gaza is exposed, and the courage and resilience of its people shine through.”

Since the Awajahs speak in Arabic and there are subtitles, don’t ask students to take notes during the film.

II. Here are some post-film discussion questions:

- How did you feel watching this movie?
- What happened to Ibrahim, the son?
- What is the family’s life like now, after the invasion?
- How are the children still affected by the trauma of the invasion?
- Describe the relationship between the parents and their children.
- Besides the poster, what are ways that the family remembers Ibrahim?
- The father (Kamal) struggles with what message he wants to give to an Israeli, but ends by saying that he does not want any human being to go through this kind of pain. What does this say about Kamal? How would you feel and what might your message be if you had had the Awajahs’ experience?
- The father wants the kind of help that will raise their “value as human beings”. What do you think he means? What kind of help could that be?
- The father also asks “How can I build a family void of violence?” What suggestions do you have? How can peaceful people deal with violence around them? Can they remove violence entirely from their surroundings?

The film ends with these statistics about Israel’s 3-week assault on Gaza:

- 1390 Palestinians killed (of these: 318 were children),
- 13 Israelis killed,
- 3540 homes destroyed

These statistics are from B’Tselem -- an Israeli human rights organization-- and Human Rights Watch -- an international human rights organization based in the U.S.

III. A United Nations Fact Finding Mission led by Judge Richard Goldstone* investigated the Gaza conflict. The following article from the UN News Centre describes the mission's findings. Ask students to read the article and summarize the major conclusions of the UN Report. Ask students why the headline might lay blame equally on both sides, while the article itself focuses more on Israel. (This could lead to a discussion about how the UN is a very political body and the US, a powerful member of the UN, is a staunch ally of Israel.)

* Since the report came out, Judge Goldstone has stated that he found no Israeli military intention to harm civilians. However, the other judges who co-wrote the report have criticized Judge Goldstone's statements and said that they are not based on fact.

IV. Gaza Articles: "The blockade on Gaza began long before Hamas came to power". For background on Gaza, and how the blockade began in 1991 and has gradually become stronger, your students could also read the following article. Or you could summarize the article for them as background before they read about the UN Report. Also included is "**Gaza on the Edge of No Return**" by Amira Hass, a respected Israeli journalist who lived in Gaza for several years.

One Family in Gaza

Name: _____

1. How did you feel watching this movie?
2. What happened to Ibrahim, the son?
3. What is the family's life like now, after the invasion?
4. How are the children still affected by the trauma of the invasion?
5. Describe the relationship between the parents and their children.
6. Besides the poster, what are ways that the family remembers Ibrahim?
7. The father (Kamal) struggles with what message he wants to give to an Israeli, but ends by saying that he does not want any human being to go through this kind of pain. What does this say about Kamal? How would you feel and what might your message be if you had had the Awajah's experience?
8. The father wants the kind of help that will raise their "value as human beings". What do you think he means? What kind of help could that be?
9. The father also asks "How can I build a family void of violence?" What suggestions do you have? How can peaceful people deal with violence around them? Can they remove violence entirely from their surroundings?

UN mission finds evidence of war crimes by both sides in Gaza conflict - UN News Center



The four person United Nations fact-finding mission on the Gaza conflict

15 September 2009 - The United Nations fact-finding mission on the Gaza conflict at the start of this year has found evidence that both Israeli forces and Palestinian militants committed serious war crimes and breaches of humanitarian law, which may amount to crimes against humanity.

“We came to the conclusion, on the basis of the facts we found, that there was strong evidence to establish that numerous serious violations of international law, both humanitarian law and human rights law, were committed by Israel during the military operations in Gaza,” the head of the mission, Justice Richard Goldstone, told a press briefing today.

“The mission concluded that actions amounting to war crimes and possibly, in some respects, crimes against humanity, were committed by the Israel Defense Force (IDF).”

“There’s no question that the firing of rockets and mortars [by armed groups from Gaza] was deliberate and calculated to cause loss of life and injury to civilians and damage to civilian structures. The mission found that these actions also amount to serious war crimes and also possibly crimes against humanity,” he said.

The 575-page report by the four-person mission was released today, ahead of its presentation to the UN’s Human Rights Council in Geneva on 29 September.

“The mission finds that the conduct of the Israeli armed forces constitute grave breaches of the Fourth Geneva Convention in respect of wilful killings and wilfully causing great suffering to protected persons and as such give rise to individual criminal responsibility,” the report’s ... summary said. “It also finds that the direct targeting and arbitrary killing of Palestinian civilians is a violation of the right to life.”

It went on to criticize the “deliberate and systematic policy on the part of the Israeli armed forces to target industrial sites and water installations,” and the use of Palestinian civilians as human shields.

On the objectives and strategy of Israel’s military operation, the mission concluded that military planners deliberately followed a doctrine which involved “the application of disproportionate force and the causing of great damage and destruction to civilian property and infrastructure, and suffering to civilian populations.”

On the firing of mortars from Gaza, the mission concluded that they were indiscriminate and deliberate attacks against a civilian population and “would constitute war crimes and may amount to crimes against humanity.” It added that their apparent intention of spreading terror among the Israeli civilian population was a violation of international law.

The report recommended that the Security Council should require Israel to take steps to launch appropriate independent investigations into the alleged crimes committed, in conformity with international standards, and report back on these investigations within six months.

It further called on the Security Council to appoint a committee of experts to monitor the proceedings taken by the Israeli Government. If these did not take place, or were not

independent and in conformity with international standards, the report called for the Security Council to refer the situation in Gaza to the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC).

It also called on the Security Council to require the committee of experts to perform a similar role with regard to the relevant Palestinian authorities.

At today's briefing, Justice Goldstone said the mission had investigated 36 incidents that took place during the Israeli operation in Gaza, which he said did not relate to decisions taken in the heat of battle, but to deliberate policies that were adopted and decisions that were taken.

As an example, he described one such incident: a mortar attack on a mosque in Gaza during a religious service, which killed 15 members of the congregation and injured many others. Justice Goldstone said that even if allegations that the mosque was used as sanctuary by military groups and that weapons were stored there were true, there was still "no justification under international humanitarian law to mortar the mosque during a service," because it could have been attacked during the night, when it was not being used by civilians.

Justice Goldstone added that the report reflected the unanimous view of the mission's four members.

The other members of the team are Christine Chinkin, Professor of International Law at the London School of Economics and Political Science at the University of London; Hina Jilani, Advocate of the Supreme Court of Pakistan and former Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Human Rights Defenders; and retired Colonel Desmond Travers, member of the Board of Directors of the Institute for International Criminal Investigations (IICI).

<http://972mag.com/the-blockade-on-gaza-began-long-before-hamas-came-to-power/>

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The blockade on Gaza began long before Hamas came to power

The gradual closure of Gaza began in 1991, when Israel canceled the general exit permit that allowed most Palestinians to move freely through Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Since then the closure, which may soon be challenged by the second Freedom Flotilla, has become almost hermetic.

By Mya Guarnieri

EXCERPT:

Athens, Greece - The second Freedom Flotilla is slated to set sail by the end of the month in an attempt to challenge the Israeli blockade of the Gaza Strip. The act will call attention to the closure that the United Nations and human rights organizations have decried as a violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention, which prohibits the collective punishment of civilians.

According to the Israeli government – and most of the mainstream media – the blockade began in 2007, following the Hamas takeover of the Gaza Strip. The aim of this “economic warfare” was to weaken Hamas, a group that the Israeli government had once supported. Israel also sought to stop rocket fire and to free Gilad Shalit, the Israeli soldier who has been held in Gaza since 2006.

Four years on, none of these goals have been achieved.

Israel has achieved a minor victory on one front, however. Even critics use 2007 as the start-date of the blockade, unintentionally legitimizing Israel’s cause-and-effect explanation that pegs the closure to political events.

But the blockade did not begin in 2007, following the Hamas takeover of the Strip. Nor did it start in 2006, with Israel’s economic sanctions against Gaza. The hermetic closure of Gaza is the culmination of a process that began twenty years ago.

Punitive closures begin

Sari Bashi is the founder and director of Gisha, an Israeli NGO that advocates for Palestinian freedom of movement. She says that the gradual closure of Gaza began in 1991, when Israel canceled the general exit permit that allowed most Palestinians to move freely through Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Non-Jewish residents of Gaza and the West Bank were required to obtain individual permits.

This was during the First Intifada. While the mere mention of the word invokes the image of suicide bombers in the Western imagination, it’s important to bear in mind that the First Intifada was, by and large, a non-violent uprising comprised of civil disobedience, strikes, and boycotts of Israeli goods.

A wave of violence came, however, in 1993. It was then, Bashi explains, that Israel began closing some crossings temporarily, turning away even those who held exit permits. Because a tremendous majority of Palestinians are not and were not suicide bombers, the restrictions on movement constituted collective punishment for the actions of a few – foreshadowing the nature of the blockade to come.

Over the years, there were other suggestions that a hermetic, punitive closure was on the horizon. The beginning of the Second Intifada, in September of 2000, saw Palestinian students “banned from traveling from Gaza to the West Bank,” Bashi says. In general, travel between the Occupied Palestinian Territories came under increasing restrictions, as well.

Exports took a hit in 2003, with the sporadic closures of the Karni crossing. While the 2005 disengagement supposedly signaled the end of the occupation of Gaza, in reality, it brought ever tightening restrictions on the movement of both people and goods. And, in 2006, the few Gazans who were still working in Israel were banned from entering, cutting them off from their jobs at a time when the Strip’s economy was under even more pressure.

Gaza today: the economy has been driven into the ground. The unemployment rate is almost 50 percent and four out of every five Palestinians in Gaza are dependent on humanitarian aid. Hospitals are running out of supplies. The chronically ill cannot always get exit permits, which can lead to access-related deaths. Students are sometimes prevented from reaching their universities. Families have been shattered. Some psychologists say that the intense pressure created by the blockade - which was compounded during Operation Cast Lead - accounts for spikes in domestic violence, divorce and drug abuse.

Gaza On The Edge Of No Return

January 6, 2011 By Amira Hass (Israeli journalist)

[Amira Hass's ZSpace Page](#) / [ZSpace](#)

"Get away from the window, you're crazy!" screamed Kauthar. She was terrified to find her daughter standing on the couch by the window, observing the street from the seventh floor. The window had bars. She was afraid not that the girl might fall, but that she would be struck by fire from a UAV (unmanned aerial vehicle). A next-door neighbour had been killed that way only a day or two earlier: a missile hit him as he was talking on his phone on the balcony.

That was on one of the first days of the Israeli onslaught on the Gaza Strip, which began on 27 December 2008. People very quickly learned the hard way that their daily activities could tempt death: standing by a window, trying to find a spot that still had a shred of mobile-phone reception so you could tell your worried father in the Rafah refugee camp that everything was all right, riding a motorbike, going up to the roof to take the washing off the line or feed the pigeons, paying a condolence visit, baking bread in the backyard oven, taking water to the goats. Journalists' notebooks and reports from human rights organisations overflow with testimonies from ordinary civilians, people who lost loved ones or who were wounded under these non-combat circumstances.

Information spread in real time, even though many houses had no electricity and people were unable to learn from the media how entire families were being wiped out. This was a hallmark of Israel's wintertime assault: the sheer number of families that had to bury most of their members, including babies, after their homes were hit by yet another bomb lauded by the Israelis for its precision.

"Although it was not my usual custom, I made a point of kissing my children every night," one young father from Gaza City told me. "I never knew which of us would still be alive the next day, and I wanted to say goodbye properly."

Samouni, Daya, Ba'alusha, Sultan, A'bsi, Abu Halima, Barbakh, Najjar, Shurrab, Abu A'isheh, Ryan, Azzam, Jbara, Astel, Haddad, Qur'an, 'Alul, Deeb. These are all families in which grandfathers, parents and their children were killed; or one parent and a number of children, or cousins, or older siblings, or just the small children. And that is without even mentioning the wounded - or the

emotional wounds suffered by everyone, which time does not heal. In the overwhelming majority of cases, the casualties were hit by computer-guided missiles or shells, operated by anonymous weapon launchers who watched their targets on a computer screen as if they were playing a video game.

“The sky was black with drones circling like flocks of birds,” one man told me with a note of self-aware Gazan hyperbole. But an Israel Defence Forces officer on reserve duty who took part in the assault confirmed his impression: “It was a total UAV war. The [UAV] unit worked harder than any others.” I met the IDF officer through Breaking the Silence, an Israeli organisation that collects testimonies about the army’s policies in the occupied territories from soldiers beginning to detect moral dissonance.

In Gaza slang, the drone is referred to as zanana. “There are three kinds of zanana,” a low-ranking Hamas official told me shortly after the end of the 2008-2009 offensive. “One watches over us and photographs every move, every person; the second fires missiles at us . . .” He paused, then added with typical Gazan drollness: “And the third kind? Its whole purpose is to annoy us, to drive us crazy.” And he expertly mimicked the humming sound made by the latest word in postmodern warfare.

The zanana isn't always heard or seen but you know it's there because of the disruptions to television broadcasts. It has been a central component in the process of turning Gaza into a vast panopticon, a detention camp under constant supervision and increasingly invisible control. Every move is photographed, documented and transferred on to computer screens in control rooms populated by young Israeli men and women who, with a few keyboard strokes, turn the zanana from voyeuristic, annoying objects into the lethal kind. The footage is backed up by old-fashioned verbal information gathered by various mechanisms of the occupation, primarily the Israeli Civil Administration and the Shin Bet, which are responsible for every civilian document (identity cards, travel permits, promissory notes for goods) and are assisted by a network of collaborators.

In the days leading up to the offensive, people noticed more persistent humming. They grew more anxious - and rightly so. Now every increase in the sound reawakens fears of another all-out attack. It's been two years, and even a thunderstorm or a slammed door can stir up the sense of dread inside Gaza.

Under Operation Cast Lead, no one was safe anywhere - at home, on the street, in UN facilities, in the fields, at work, at the American school, or in public shelters opened by the UN for people fleeing their homes. In the past there had been isolated areas attacked by the Israeli military, where everyone

felt that they were targets for a few hours or days, but during Cast Lead the entire Gaza Strip was simultaneously under attack from air, sea and land for three weeks without pause. Gazans had nowhere to flee (unlike the residents of Lebanon, for instance, who had previously become acquainted with the all-embracing thoroughness of Israeli assaults). This is another component of the "heritage" Gazans have borne for these past two years: a feeling of total exposure to mortal danger and lack of any protection.

If there had been any illusions that Israel would not cross certain red lines, it was because, in the not-so-distant past, the Israeli military had been positioned amid the Palestinians, and because most of the older people knew Israelis and even spoke Hebrew. This intimacy was considered a means of preventing arbitrary killings. However, dozens of cases in which soldiers killed civilians at short range, and not just in a "video game", proved that geographical proximity is no safety net.

Mohammed Shurrab, 65, a resident of Khan Younis in southern Gaza, took advantage of the brief respite that the army declared each day to drive with two of his sons to their plot of land. On the afternoon of Friday 16 January (two days before the end of the offensive), they were driving home through an eastern neighbourhood whose residents had all fled two weeks earlier. Israeli soldiers who had set up a base in an abandoned house some 20 or 30 yards away fired at the car.

There was no battle going on at the time. The three men were wounded, the father sustaining only injuries to his arm. He called for help. The nearest hospital was just a minute or two away, but the soldiers would not allow the ambulance to approach. The Red Cross, the Red Crescent, Doctors for Human Rights (based in Tel Aviv), a third son who lives in the US, and later myself, all tried to reach someone who might persuade the commanders to relent. But it was in vain. The hours crawled by, and the sons bled to death in their father's arms. Shortly before midnight, 27-year-old Kassab died. Late on Saturday morning, 17-year-old Ibrahim died.

(An IDF spokesperson wrote to me in response: "As a rule, during the ceasefire the IDF responded with fire only when rockets were launched at Israel or shots fired at the IDF. We are unable to investigate every incident and confirm or deny all information. Ambulances were able to enter only after operational conditions made it possible. The injured [sic] parties were evacuated by the Palestinian ministry of health to a hospital in Rafah.")

This was not an unusual case of short-range cruelty and bold-faced lies to the media; even so, the number of Palestinians (both civilians and combatants)

killed at short range during the 2008-2009 assault is negligible compared to the number killed by various "video-game" methods, far away from those who gave the order to shoot and those who pulled the trigger: fewer than 100 by the former method, compared to some 1,300 by the latter. These figures are based on inquiries I made with the Palestinian human rights organisation al-Mezan. This particular case of short-range brutality reflects the commander's spirit and the spirit of the assault.

An old acquaintance, Salah al-Ghoul, thought that he would be protected by a different kind of closeness. The son of an impoverished family of refugees, he became a wealthy merchant and built a large house on the north-western border with Israel. He is well known by the Israeli authorities because of his requests for travel and trade permits. They know full well that he is a political opponent of Hamas and Islamic Jihad. He speaks fluent Hebrew. During brief routine military incursions into the Gaza Strip, when tanks rolled past his house, he would keep on roasting corn out in his yard.

On 3 January 2009, on the eve of the ground raid, an Israeli plane dropped a bomb on al-Ghoul's dream home, completely destroying it. His son, who was studying for his matriculation exams, and his cousin, a lawyer who was making coffee at the time, were both killed. An IDF spokesperson responded in writing to my query: "The target in question was identified as a Hamas observation point, directing attacks against IDF forces . . ."

This is an absolute lie, like so many other lies fed by the IDF to the Israeli public. Still, the lie holds a kernel of truth: for several years, Hamas and other armed Palestinian organisations chose to fire on Israeli communities along the Gaza border using home-made rockets ("Qassams") or primitive missiles. Their main operational "success" was in managing to terrify many Israelis.

In 2003, I asked two commanders of Hamas's Qassam unit what good the rocket firing did when Israel retaliated with such force against the civilian Palestinian population. They answered candidly: "We want mothers and children in Israel to feel the same fear our mothers and children feel."

During the Second Intifada, which began in September 2000, the use of weapons - ineffective and counterproductive as it might have been in the fight against the occupation - served the Palestinian organisations in their internal competition for hegemony and popularity. As part of its propaganda efforts, Israel exaggerated, and still does, the extent of the threat posed by the rockets. But the Israeli overstatements also helped Hamas's own propaganda, allowing it to represent itself as the only organisation able to weaken Israel - on the way to ultimate defeat. This permanent promise of future victory is also

what gives Hamas the prerogative to halt or greatly reduce the mortar shelling, at the same time as quelling public debate over the logic of its strategy. In this respect, the cruelty of Israel's total attack achieved its objective.

But did Israel fail at another aim, namely, to topple the Hamas regime? Opinions are divided as to whether this was an objective. Social and mental severance between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank has been, since the early 1990s, a cornerstone of Israel's undeclared policy. Precisely because all Gazans - including Hamas's opponents - felt that they had become targets in Israel's range of fire, they could not use the offensive as a reason to disclaim the Hamas regime, even as it continued to refine its methods of oppression. The more ensconced Hamas rule becomes in the Gaza Strip, and the dimmer the chances of healing the political rift with the Palestine Liberation Organisation, the more this severance becomes a reality from which there is no return.

"In Israel they were living in a virtual reality, believing there was an actual war going on in Gaza," said some of the soldiers who took part in the offensive, whom I met through Breaking the Silence. They very quickly discovered that, contrary to what they had been told by their commanders, Hamas was not waging an intense or determined war against them. A Palestinian security man told me there had been a conscious decision in Hamas not to sacrifice its finest combatants in such a lopsided war. The organisation was well aware that it could not deliver the goods it had promised the Palestinian public for two years - that is, "surprises in warfare".

Still, immediately the offensive ended, Hamas declared victory. "In 1967 Israel subdued all the Arab armies in six days, but it could not conquer the Gaza Strip from us even after three weeks," its spokespeople said. But people in Gaza preferred to quote an old man who courageously proclaimed on television: "One more victory like this and all of Gaza will be wiped out."

An officer who broke the silence told me that he felt as though he had taken part in a military exercise using live fire, whose aim was to improve and upgrade operational communications between Israeli ground forces and the Israeli air force. As more preparation for wars to come, perhaps?

Amira Hass is a correspondent for Haaretz.

This report, written exclusively for the New Statesman, was translated from the Hebrew by Jessica Cohen

Gaza Timeline

August 2004 Ariel Sharon moves to withdraw Israeli forces and citizens from Gaza Strip, as declared in December 2003

September 2005 Last Israeli soldiers leave Gaza; settlers are forcibly removed

January 2006 Hamas wins a majority in Palestinian parliamentary elections

June 2006 Israel invades Gaza in attempt to rescue Gilad Shalit, a kidnapped soldier

December 2006 Fighting begins between the governing Hamas and Fatah parties

June 2007 Hamas seizes complete control of Gaza following struggle with Fatah. Naval blockade of Gaza begins, leaving the territory cut off by land, sea and air

December 2008 Israel launches a three-week offensive to stop persistent rocket attacks. Between 1,100 and 1,400 Gazans are killed, with 13 Israeli losses

May 2010 An international flotilla tries to break the naval blockade. Israeli forces board one ship from Turkey, killing nine people

June 2010 Israel announces that it is easing the Gaza blockade