



A Wall of Silence



The Limits of Public
Discourse in Israel
The Case of Gaza



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Isha L'Isha—Haifa Feminist Center is a feminist collective established in 1983. Our aim is to bring about social change by promoting values of equal rights and equal opportunities for all women; eradicating discrimination, violence and oppression of women; and fostering solidarity among women.



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Background

Without prior warning, on Saturday, December 27, 2008 at 11:30 am, the Israeli army bombed the Gaza Strip. This prolonged attack lasted three weeks, until January 18, 2009, and as a result, the Palestinians suffered 1,387¹ casualties, including 773 who were non combatants. Among the casualties, 320 were children under the age of 18, 109 were women, 330 combatants and 248 were police. During this period, the Israelis suffered casualties as well, including 3 civilians and a security officer who were killed by missile fire, 5 Israeli soldiers fell in combat, and 4 Israeli soldiers were killed by friendly fire.

According to United Nations reports, some 3,500 homes were destroyed in Gaza. The economic base that was already shaky was now almost completely destroyed as a result of the destruction of many factories, agricultural areas, water facilities and infrastructures.

In April 2009, the president of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights (CHR) authorized and dispatched a delegation to research violations of international humanitarian law and human rights law during the attack on Gaza. Judge Richard Goldstone was chosen to head the delegation. The Israeli government refused to cooperate with the UN investigative mission.

In September 2009, the delegation presented its findings to the CHR, which ratified the report. While the findings do not clear the Hamas of violations of international law, the primary attention was on the Israeli government and it being suspected of war crimes during the attack on Gaza.



1 B'tselem – The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories http://www.btselem.org/Hebrew/Press_Releases/20090909.asp

Introduction

In Israel, even though few have read the Goldstone report, there is a prevalent belief that the report is one-sided and therefore not accurate and does not reflect the nature of the Israeli military activities during the attack on Gaza. The report raises serious questions about whether Israel and its army committed war crimes. One of the major claims of the Goldstone report is that the Israeli government was intentional in not making a distinction between Palestinian civilians and Palestinian combatants. This in turn legitimized the Israeli army's attacks on civilians, homes and public buildings, though it is a clear violation of international law, and considered a war crime. Despite the fact that allegations of possible war crimes constitute a serious matter, the Israeli government chose not to cooperate with the investigative team and to ignore their conclusions.

Information published during 2009 in various international and Israeli reports received little local coverage and failed to raise a public debate concerning ethical questions regarding Israel's responsibility towards Palestinians in Gaza.

The Israeli media kept in line with government policy, and did not discuss any cases suspected as violations of international law. The Israeli media mainly dealt with the ulterior motives of the authors of the Goldstone report, and portrayed them as biased and anti-Israeli, undermining their credibility and the report's reliability.

The Israeli media and the political elites chose to attack the "messenger," with accusation directed at Judge Goldstone, who headed the committee. Repeated claims that Goldstone produced a biased, inaccurate and misleading report were used to attack the Commission on Human Rights that nominated him to the mission. Evidence provided by Palestinians interviewed in the report was claimed to be lies and that there was no balance between testimonies of Palestinians and those of Israelis.

The Israeli public was exposed to very little information on what was going on in Gaza: few articles in the Israeli media dealing directly with the situation of Palestinians in Gaza, stories of Israeli soldiers returning from military operations, as well as the sharp



criticism from around the world make an opening for those who wish to know. These random pieces of information could have made the Israeli public understand that there are people living under siege, occupation, poverty and fear and that this last attack by Israel was a hard and traumatic one for them. Yet, the fact that most Israelis did not publically react to these reports leads us to ask a series of questions. What does one do with these broken pieces of information? Can they be completely denied? Or maybe this same information stays within and among us, and is left unspoken, silenced?

The attack on Gaza gives us an opportunity to look at the state silencing mechanisms we as citizens are subject to. It also allows us to see how we, as human beings, may find it difficult to tolerate the dissonance we feel inside between the need to defend ourselves and our loved ones, and the knowledge that we, as humans, have responsibility for others, even during war and certainly in a situation of occupation.

Who Silences the Public Discourse in Israel?

Who is Silenced?

In Israel, the subject of “national security” is perceived as the domain of security experts, who are a small, exclusive group, primarily of retired and active military personnel. Most of the Israeli public remains outside this tight-knit circle of those in the know, those with the authority to speak out and act on issues of peace and security. Women, Palestinian citizens of Israel, Mizrahim – Israelis of oriental descent, ultra-religious Jews, citizens who did not serve in the army, people with disabilities and new immigrants all these have a minimal voice in the Israeli media during escalations of political violence. These groups also have minimal representation vis-à-vis peace and security in decision-making bodies, and their viewpoints are seen as invalid by those in the military elite.



Ella from Bat-Yam: "I would like to see women express themselves in the peace talks. Since they (the men) sit and discuss economics and security, my idea is for a 'women's room' in peace talks. This space would give voice to women who would sit and talk about peace, and their voices and opinions would have entree to the main discussion as well."²



What is being Silenced?

During the attack, there were some 40,000 pregnant women in Gaza. These women were unable to leave shelter in order to give birth in hospital or to receive medical care. Those who did manage to reach hospitals found the care inadequate since hospitals were inundated, caring for those wounded during the attacks.³



At approximately 15:00 a white phosphorous shell penetrated the corridor ceiling. A bomb came through the ceiling, it hit just above my husband's head, and over my children. My husband was decapitated, and Zeid and Hamza died almost instantly. There was fire everywhere. It was very hot, my son Zeid was calling 'its fire, its fire.' Then I heard him say the shuhadah, and he went quiet.⁴



- 2 Women for Peace, Voices from Israel, IWC Dec 2009.
- 3 UNFPA Press Release: "Pregnant Women and Newborns are Unseen Victims of Gaza Conflict, Warns UNFPA." <http://www.unfpa.org/public/News/pid/1529>
- 4 "Through Women's Eyes." A report of the Palestinian Center for Human Rights (PCHR). http://www.pchrgaza.org/files/Reports/English/pdf_spec/through-women's%20eyes.pdf

This wall of silence helped keep difficult scenes from Gaza reaching the general Israeli public. Despite the many reports from Gaza on the killing of civilians, including hundreds of women and children, destruction of thousands of homes and public buildings, the distress of the ill and injured, and bombardment of areas concentrated with refugees, the Israeli media minimized reporting on events in Gaza during the attack and on the subsequent impact on the population.



This wall of silence during the attack also served to block the voices of resistance to the attack from Israeli society. Reports of protest demonstrations, opinion articles, and invitations to interview those who criticized the Israeli government were rare and got practically no media coverage in the mainstream media channels. Any homegrown dissidents or critiques of the army's actions were seen in the best case as irresponsible, and in the worst case, as unpatriotic and harmful to state security and its citizens.



What are the Benefits of the State from these Forms of Silencing?

The silencing of public discourse serves first and foremost to benefit the political and military state establishments. A lack of any critical public debate on all things related to actions of the government and army enables these establishments to act without any real public critique of their actions.



The siege and military attacks that do not distinguish between innocent civilians and combatants can only take place when there is, in Israel, a complete silencing of the complex reality on the Palestinian side. It is a reality which includes people, whose experiences can evoke in us different emotions, and who represent a wide variety of ideas and worldviews. As the conflict drags on and deepens, so the fears grow stronger, and feelings of empathy with the suffering of the Palestinians dissipate. This reality facilitates the ability for national mobilization into war, and prevents any questioning of issues like demolishing of homes, flattening of schools, or massacres. Any knowledge that leads to a complex picture is perceived in contrast to the black-and-white reality and interpreted as dangerous and subversive.



Silencing the public discourse also enables the state of Israel to restrain from taking responsibility for its actions. Denying the suffering and the injustice gives legitimacy to military actions of this type. As long as the Israeli public is not questioning the attack on Gaza, the state of Israel can deal with the blame and accusations thrown at it from the global arena.



How Does the Silencing Mechanism Work?

The Israeli public is subject to a silencing mechanism that works by creating a clear sense of division into black and white, right and wrong, us and them.



Living Under Fear – The existence of the state is not perceived as a given, guaranteed situation, but rather it is seen as if, ultimately, only one collective would be able to secure its national and physical existence. The high level of fear and intimidation broadcast to the Israeli public by politicians and the media undermine the sense of personal and national security.



Reinforcing Stereotypes – Constructing a national-Jewish self-perception as moral, humane, cultured, and peace-seeking, while constructing the stereotype of the Palestinian as the complete opposite. These images reinforce the belief that there is no partner, and no one to talk with.



Lack of Information – The educational system and media do not provide knowledge and information that could help build a complex image of the Palestinian society. In this way, existing stereotypes and the threat of the “other” beyond the border are reinforced.



Invalidating Political Alternatives – Every alternative critique, action and vision that does not line up with the official position of the state of Israel, is seen by the hegemony as contradicting the vital interests of state security and, in some cases, seen as traitorous.

The Israeli Public – what does it Sacrifice by keeping the Code of Silence?

The silencing mechanism is also successful as it creates an apparent dissonance between our loyalty to our “natural” social collective and our commitment to values of justice. This same dissonance has often accompanied women and men in Israel in the way they relate to the ongoing occupation, severe blockade, denial of freedom of movement among residents of the Occupied Territories, and more. We are talking about Israelis refusing to take responsibility for a state of war; this refusal makes it easier to deal with the uselessness and cruelty of the endless war. By making the reality one-dimensional, the country’s citizens find it easier to personally cope with the harsh and complex reality. At the same time, this perception of reality ignores the complexities of other discourses; and as such, is not able to look ahead into the future, towards a political agreement that might develop in our region. Furthermore, if we as citizens collaborate and adopt the stereotypic viewpoint towards Palestinians and the Palestinian struggle, then we are doomed to be mere pieces in a chess game played by the politics of the conflict.



Pesia from Eilat: “As women, we have a problem, because we send them (our sons) to battle units. I stopped going to Women in Black when my boys decided they wanted to get accepted into the elite units. Do we want peace? How did we raise our sons? Did we teach them to be fighters? In the youth movement of the left-wing Meretz, they demonstrate and then go to fighting units.”⁵



If, however, we demand to know more, seek information, and expect a just public discourse on the concept of security in Israel, and mainly if we create images of real live Palestinians, out of what is an amorphous nameless threat/ people, then these stories, experiences, connections, names and ideas will all help to increase our active participation as citizens, who are capable of creative thinking and innovation in our current political situation.



War Crimes

A war crime is a punishable offense, under international law, for violations of the law of war by any person or persons, military or civilian. Any violation of the laws of war constitutes a war crime.



War crimes include, among other things: Mass murder of innocent civilians; the deportation of a large group of people; use of non-conventional weapons; collective punishment; home demolitions as punishment; preventing food supplies, medical equipment and more.⁶



The laws of war have two essential principles: the first is to distinguish; one must distinguish between civilians and combatants, between military facilities and civilian facilities. The second is that of proportionality; an attack is not legitimate if it leads to a disproportionate damage to civilians and civilian facilities.



It was real urban warfare. This is the difference between urban warfare and a limited confrontation. In urban warfare, anyone is your enemy. No innocents. It was simply urban warfare in every way. (Testimony of a soldier who participated in the fighting in Gaza).⁷

On January 20, 2009, a number of Israeli human rights organizations⁸ contacted the Attorney General of Israel, demanding the establishment of an investigative mechanism which would undertake effective and independent investigations to examine the Israeli army's incursion into Gaza, including cases where there was suspicion that Israeli forces may be responsible for breaking international humanitarian law. The Itach Ma'aki – Women Lawyers for Social Justice organization joined them in a request to examine the extent and impact of the army's actions on women and children and the arising suspicion that Israel did not act in accordance to international law. The response by the Attorney General was that Israel "acted in accordance with the laws of war of the international law, including keeping with the principles of distinguishing and proportionality."⁹

"Other Voice" from the Gaza Border area

For the past decade, residents of Israel who live in areas bordering the Gaza strip, have lived under the constant threat of Kassam missiles, while those who live in the Gaza strip have lived under a tight closure, with air raids and bombings that brought destruction and loss of life to almost every home in the past years.

7 Breaking the Silence, "Soldiers' Testimonies from Operation Cast Lead, Gaza 2009." June 2009. http://www.showrimshatika.org/oferet/ENGLISH_oferet.pdf

8 The Association for Civil Rights in Israel, Bimkom, B'Tselem, Gisha – Legal Center for Freedom of Movement, Hamoked – Center for the Defence of the Individual, Physicians for Human Rights Israel, Public Committee against Torture in Israel, and Yesh Din.

9 A response letter from the office of the Attorney General to Itack Ma'aki, dated 9.3.2009



"I am afraid of the Kassams. Since the war broke out, I barely had the courage to go beyond our street. But what frightens me even more is the public and media monolithic and heated discourse, which is impossible to break through. . . It scares me how little room there is for the different voice, and how difficult it is to express it from here. I am willing to pay the price of isolation, but not the price of fear."¹⁰



During this period, the demonization of the “other” escalated on both sides, the hope diminished, the instinct for vengeance soared, and the willingness to go further with violence received more legitimacy on each side. Nevertheless, some of the residents of Sderot and the area bordering the Gaza strip realize that where there are human beings, there is humanity. Out of this understanding, a group called “Other Voice” was established in Sderot. This group calls to stop the blood cycle and calls for a civil solution to the political conflict. Since its establishment, group members stay in contact with residents of the Gaza strip via telephone and Internet. These contacts were maintained throughout the attack on Gaza in January 2009, as they realize that maintaining human contact between the two sides of the border enables maintaining trust and hope even in a state of violent conflict.



Silencing the Resistance at Home: the Feminist Struggle

During the attack on the Gaza Strip, many women took to the streets to protest against it, attempting to present a different voice in the media. The limited media coverage they did receive was wrapped in mockery and ridicule. Moreover, police forces acted to prevent the demonstrations by arresting protesters, keeping them incarcerated, bringing them in for investigations,



and declaring the demonstrations as infringing on public order and more.¹¹

Many of the women who objected to the attack were from feminist organizations in Israel, who present a broad worldview to Israeli society. Theirs is an alternative vision of the relationships between the state and its citizens, between religion and state, Jews and Palestinians in Israel, center-periphery relations, and issues of economics and security. The feminist perspective makes the connections between one type of oppression and another within society, and therefore the solutions it proposes are not for one group at the expense of another, but rather solutions that the whole society would benefit from. It is a vision that is often perceived as naïve, but in fact, it includes a difficult coping with knowledge that is open to complexity, enabling the inclusion of new experiences, unfamiliar ideas, and invites voices and experiences of those from outside the immediate group. The process of acquiring this type of knowledge provides confidence to examine new and unexplored alternatives for actions.



“Rawiya led a group of us, about 15 to 20 of us, all women. I told her, “Look, a soldier is coming out of the house.” She said, “Don’t worry, be strong.” One of our neighbors raised her child. We saw the soldier come out. The kids were screaming. And he fired one gunshot at her head. It hit her. I saw him shoot. He was about 100 meters away, at the house of Fares al-Najjar. He was inside [the doorway] but he pointed his gun outside.”¹²



11 From Coalition of Women for Peace Media Project Monthly Summaries. http://coalitionofwomen.org/home/hebrew/activities/media_project/monthly_summaries/oct08_jan09

12 Human Rights Watch. “White Flag Deaths – Killings of Palestinian Civilians during Operation Cast Lead.” August 2009. <http://www.hrw.org/en/reports/2009/08/13/white-flag-deaths>

The activities of feminist women in Israel against the occupation are perceived by Israeli society as actions that identify too strongly with the enemy, while making compromises to the point of betraying the interests of Israel. This perception stands in full contrast of the self-perception these women have. They see themselves as committed to values of justice, struggling against oppression of any kind, regardless of ethnicity, nationality, gender and religion. The approach motivating the actions of the Israeli government and army, managed according to the zero-sum game rules, is not acceptable by the feminist movement, which strives to end the occupation and achieve just peace. Instead, they present a worldview with a possibility of creating political change that can incorporate the aspirations and needs of all sides involved in the conflict. Compromise, to them, is not perceived as weakness, or as giving up on resources essential for society and the state. According to their perception, steps towards peace are reached through dialogue between the parties, and not by military superiority of one side over the other.



Links to reports and websites on the Attack on Gaza 2009

- Other Voice. <http://www.othervoice.org/welcome-eng.htm>
- Amnesty International Israel "22 Days of Death and Destruction." July 2009. <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/MDE15/015/2009/en/8f299083-9a74-4853-860f-0563725e633a/mde150152009en.pdf>
- B'Tselem Press Release. "B'Tselem publishes complete fatality figures from Operation Cast Lead." September 2009. http://www.btselem.org/english/press_releases/20090909.asp
- The Public Committee against Torture in Israel. "No Second Thoughts. The Changes in the Israeli Defense Forces' Combat Doctrine in Light of 'Operation Cast Lead'" November 2009. http://www.stoptorture.org.il/files/no%20second%20thoughts_ENG_WEB.pdf
- Breaking the Silence. "Soldiers' Testimonies from Operation Cast Lead, Gaza 2009." June 2009. http://www.shovrimshatika.org/oferet/ENGLISH_oferet.pdf
- Human Rights in Gaza and Israel during the Hostilities: Reports from Israeli Human Rights Groups. <http://www.gazaeng.blogspot.com/>
- Dr. Mona El-Farra's blog. <http://www.fromgaza.blogspot.com/>
- UNIFEM: "Voicing the Needs of Women and Men in Gaza: Beyond the Aftermath of the 23 Day Israeli Military Operations." April 2009. http://www.unifem.org/materials/item_detail.php?ProductID=133
- Report of the United Nations Fact Finding Mission on the Gaza Conflict (Goldstone Report) September 2009. <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/12session/A-HRC-12-48.pdf>
- OCHA – Gaza Crisis Responses, June 2009. http://www.ochaopt.org/gazacrisis/admin/output/files/ocha_opt_gaza_response_database_report_june_2009.pdf
- Human Rights Watch. "White Flag Deaths – Killings of Palestinian Civilians during Operation Cast Lead." August 2009. <http://www.hrw.org/en/reports/2009/08/13/white-flag-deaths>

