

Our First Submission to *The Lancet*. From a Bomb-Shelter.

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A few weeks ago, while 3 Israeli teenagers were kidnapped and murdered, the wife of Palestinian Authority (PA) chairman, Mahmoud Abbas, was discharged from an Israeli private hospital after orthopedic surgery. More often than not, reality is far from black and white ¹. Yet, in the depiction of the current situation- "An open letter for the people of Gaza" ² - reality is seemingly black.

Twenty-four signatories claim to "report the facts as we see them" and under an "ethical and practice" pretense, use the pages of *The Lancet*, to chant skewed and shamelessly unfounded propaganda that would fail any peer review. Under false claims of "no conflict of interest", the authors who are deeply involved in pro-Palestinian organizations slander Israel. **Their evidence-less attempt to hide behind their medical degree in order to spread the propaganda of the terrorist organization Hamas, is a betrayal of our profession.** A lot has been said about the bias of the international media in the portrayal of this conflict ³. This rebuttal in *The Lancet* is our attempt to show the other side of the coin ^{*}.

We are baffled by the decision of The Lancet's editorial board to publish this one-sided op-ed, full of hatred, ill-conceived notions and factual chicanery. This publication definitely defies, in our eyes, the very calling of *The Lancet* to "...consider any original contribution that advances or illuminates medical science or practice, or that educates or entertains the journal's readers" ⁴.

Like the authors, we too went through medical school. Like them – **we too are horrified by the deaths of innocent women and children.** Unlike them, the word "massacre", used whimsically, is not foreign. Our families went up in smoke in Europe. Israel is our home now. Unlike all of them, **we served in the (Israeli Defense Forces) IDF, and treated multiple Palestinians. Our humanity has been truly put to the test on more than one occasion, and we are proud to say that we prevailed.**

A few days ago we saw a photo in one of the social networks in which a muslim protestor somewhere in Europe holds two signs. One saying "Stop Hamas terrorism on Israel", the other "Free Gaza from Hamas". This says it all. But how did we even get here, to a third round of fighting with Hamas?

^{*} Throughout the process of writing this response, we had 7 sirens go off in Tel-Aviv indicating a missile was heading our way, giving us 1:30 min to head for shelter. On one occasion, fragments from a missile after interception with "iron dome" fell on our neighborhood synagogue, 1 meter away from our balcony. *We urge you to think of that the next time you sit down to write a manuscript.*

In August 2005, Israel disengaged unilaterally from Gaza. Israel dismantled settlements and uprooted over 10,000 Israelis. It withdrew its military and civilian presence from every inch of Gaza, effectively ending the occupation. Israel continued to uphold its obligations under the 4th Geneva Convention in matters where it continues to have effective control such as providing water and electricity ⁵. Likewise, and in direct contrast to the libels told in the Open Letter, **Israel has always allowed the passage of food, medicine and fuel into Gaza** [†].

Rather than using the end of the Israeli occupation to create the "Singapore of the Middle East", Hamas overthrew the PA in a military coup d'états in June 2007 in killing 550 and leaving hundreds injured ⁶. Since then, the people of Gaza have been living under the tyranny of a violent extremist regime ⁷. Hamas hatred is not only towards Israel but also against their Palestinian brethren ⁸.

As for the alleged "aggression of Gaza by Israel". The current cycle of violence began when Hamas operatives abducted and murdered three settler teens in the West Bank. Without prejudice to the question of the legality of settlements, the cold-blooded murder of innocent teens is inexcusable. Amidst arrests of Hamas operatives that followed, Hamas began indiscriminately barraging of Israeli towns. Israel initially limited its response to air strikes aimed at the missile launchers and Hamas terrorists. On June 15th Israel agreed to the Egyptian ceasefire and halted its attacks. Hamas rejected the ceasefire and shot over 80 rockets at Israeli civilian populations ⁹, and violated a UN sanctioned humanitarian ceasefire. The U.S, EU, and most of the international community recognized Israel's right to defend itself against the aggression of Hamas and commended it for accepting the ceasefire. **And then came the terror tunnels** ¹⁰.

The first assault by 13 terrorists emerging out of a terror attack tunnel near an Israeli town armed with assault weapons and syringes occurred on July 17th. Their goal was to murder and kidnap Israelis. The IDF has since uncovered 31 such tunnels, and counting. Interrogations of Hamas forces paint a disquieting picture. A maze of tunnels accommodating two hundred Hamas terrorists led to six Israeli towns. On Rosh Hashana, (the Jewish New Years Eve) when families would be sitting for dinner, Hamas was planning to emerge from the tunnels, kill entire communities and

[†] Corroborated in personal communications with Gisha "an Israel non-for-profit organization aimed at protecting the freedom of movement of Palestinians, especially Gaza residents". <http://gisha.org>

kidnap the youngsters ¹¹. This calamitous plan would have been an Israeli 9/11.

It seems unreasonable that an impoverished community such as that of Gaza, would have such a sophisticated and extravagant offensive infrastructure. The question is, where did the money come from?

Over the past decade, Hamas has received an excess of \$10B in foreign aid. The signatories were quick to contend that Israel's policies led to "hunger, thirst, pollution, shortage of medicines, electricity...sewage outflow...". They claim, "building materials have been blockaded so that schools, homes, and institutions cannot be properly rebuilt." Nothing could be further from the truth.

In one week of groundwork, Israel discovered over 30 terror tunnels with estimated 500 tons of cement in each ¹². The cement and materials used to build these tunnels, alongside the reported 900 tunnels Egypt has destroyed over the past year, could have been used to turn Gaza into an oasis. **Out of the reported hundreds of millions of dollars in aid just about zero schools, hospitals, and institutions were built. The money, we now know, is all underground cementing terror passages and stockpiling ammunition bunkers** ^{13, 14, 15}.

A significant share of these funds went to cushion the pockets of Hamas "leaders" such as Musa Abu Marzuk (\$2-3B), Khaled Mashaal (\$2-5B), Ismail Haniyeh (\$4M) ¹⁶. **Error! Bookmark not defined.**, while the people of Gaza were left in ruins.

In addition to blaming Israel for the below-par economic situation, the authors questioned the moral asymmetry in the conflict. **There definitely is asymmetry**. Israel's strategy is aimed at protecting life. Hamas' strategy is to exploit children. Hundreds of Palestinian children have been killed while building the terror tunnel network ¹⁷ and more recently, as shields.

Hamas' use of civilian objects and populations to launch its attacks is atrocious. The recent EU Council conclusions published on July 22 stated that "...**The EU strongly condemns calls on the civilian population of Gaza to provide themselves as human shields** ¹⁸. *There is asymmetry*. While Hamas' "golden hour" terrorists ride in ambulances, Israel build a field hospital. While Israel spends billions on civil defense, Hamas use donkeys as IEDs ‡ and dress up as elderly women to launch perfidious attacks. UN facilities have become a haven for terrorist activity, as acknowledged by

‡ Improvised explosive device

the UN itself ^{19, 20}. Hospitals such as Shifa Hospital, mentioned in the Open Letter, “[have] become a de fact headquarters for Hamas leaders who can be seen in the hallways and offices” ²¹.

The authors claim that the IDF is "clearly directing fire to target whole families killing them within their homes". This outrageous accusation is baseless.²². Al Jazeera published an updated list of casualties in Gaza. **The data** (82% of fatalities men, 66% of them between the ages of 18 and 38) **attests to the fact that the IDF is indeed targeting combatants** ²³.

While Gaza is one of the most densely populated areas in the world, Israel has been working tirelessly to develop high precision weapons and warning mechanisms to minimize civilian casualties. Such measures (text messages, leaflets, repetitive announcements §) surpass NATO operations in precision and its proportionality calculus. **Civilians are never a target**. Unfortunately, Hamas' military tactics attempt to ensure maximum civilian casualties.

Given these conditions, even the most humanitarian army cannot avoid civilian casualties, however hard it tries, however tragic. International Humanitarian Law is on Israel's side ²⁴. When a civilian target is used for military purpose, it loses its protective status and becomes a legitimate target. While every life is sacred, urban warfare has its gloomy realities, and international law recognizes and accommodates such bras tacks.

Israel should not apologize for its low death rates. It has spent billions of dollars to create technologies and infrastructure for the world's most advance civil defense system. While at the same time, Hamas did nothing for its citizens.

The authors claim to have a moral high ground. More than 170,000 Syrians have been murdered since the conflict began in March 2011 and 2.8 million people have been displaced ²⁵. I wonder how many of the signatories visited Syria over the past 4 years. Israeli physicians have been treating Syrian casualties in our hospitals as well as in a dedicated military field hospital erected just to this end. **700 was the latest count of Syrian victims treated by Israel** ²⁶.

Last week, Israel set up a field hospital near the Gaza crossing to provide care for those caught in the crosshairs. Hamas on its end, shot mortars at the field hospital on July 23rd, clearly considering their own wounded as

§ BBC. Israel Defense Forces: recorded message phone warning. July 16, 2014. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-28324270>

negligible compared with the potential triumph of killing an Israeli doctor²⁷. Israeli physicians treat Palestinians routinely and in special programs such as “Save a Child’s Heart” where **kids from the Palestinian territories, Iraq, and Iran (over 200 kids to date) receive free open-heart surgeries in Israel** **. In 2013, Israel treated 1-year old Amal, granddaughter of Hamas leader Ismail Hanieyh for gastroenteritis, while scores of Gazans are treated in Israeli hospitals at any given time.

We applaud *The Lancet* for addressing the current situation in our region. We would welcome an unbiased approach though, not as much unsubstantiated political rhetoric. We are appalled by the choice of its authors’ terminology, and with the lack of “scientific rigor” in presenting the facts. Such incitement only widens the gap of mistrust and solidifies the notion that no matter what Israel does, no matter how hard it tries, it will never be good enough for a hypocritical community that denounces aggression “on the basis of our ethics and practice” – but only if Israel is involved.

There is suffering, grief and pain on both sides. We sincerely hope this will end soon, and that peace will be upon us all. Until then, as a service to those living in the region and to our colleagues from around the world, we call on *The Lancet* to promote informative dialogue and discussion.

** Please refer to <http://www.saveachildsheart.org> and see the kids currently getting care.

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