

Enough Politics in the Middle East without Canada

by Reem Bahdi

Published January 28 2009

Gaza is about half the size and population of Toronto, but with two crucial differences. Of the approximately 1.4 million people living in Gaza, 50 per cent are children. And it is often said that Gaza is a giant prison. Gaza is surrounded by walls and high-tech surveillance. Virtually no one is permitted to leave without Israeli permission. When Israel began its "Operation Cast Lead" on Dec. 27, Gazans had nowhere to run and nowhere to hide.

Richard Falk, professor emeritus of International Law at Princeton University and the United Nations Special Rapporteur for the Palestinian Territories, is among those calling for Israel to be investigated for war crimes. Falk rejects arguments that Israel can legally claim self-defence because Israel did not restrict its attacks to areas in which rockets were fired, failed to pursue diplomatic solutions and locked people into Gaza, denying them any reasonable means of escape.

I spent the first half of January in Ramallah. As I followed most of the Israeli Defence Force campaign on Gaza and the world reaction to it, I contemplated Canada's role in the Middle East from this perspective. We risk, it seems, becoming increasingly out of touch with reality. Our official position—which stresses Hamas's responsibility for the suffering in Gaza—effectively ignores that Israel, as an occupying power, has a duty under international law to protect Palestinian civilians. Our official response not only renders international law largely irrelevant, it dehumanizes the Palestinian people.

By any account, Operation Cast Lead was an experiment in military prowess. All evidence points to the use of sophisticated lethal weapons on the part of the IDF. Israeli journalist Amira Hass described the effects of the white phosphorous bombs that international human rights organizations confirm were dropped on Gaza in unknown numbers as "mushroom clouds of pinkish-red smoke, suffocating gas, harsh burns on the skin, extraordinarily maimed live and dead bodies."

Israel is also suspected of using a host of new weapons in its Gaza assault, including dense inert metal explosive, or DIME. DIME hits a relatively small area, but if it comes into contact with human beings, it rips them to shreds in a way that a "regular" bomb cannot. A doctor with whom I spoke told me that the number of amputations in Gaza is unprecedented and that medics have never before seen such horrific injuries. A paramedic at the Al-Awda Hospital in the Jabalya refugee camp reported to the Palestinian Center for Human Rights that about 90 per cent of the wounded he had rescued were brought in with at least one limb missing. International medics confirm this is evidence of DIME and note that if the patients live, they will likely develop cancer or leukemia.

Hamas, for its part, continues to launch its rudimentary rockets over the Israeli walls that surround Gaza. Ten Israeli soldiers and three civilians were killed during Operation Cast Lead.

Some Israelis have been moved by some of the suffering coming from Gaza. When Israeli media carried the traumatic story about a Palestinian doctor who lives in Gaza but worked in Israel, many Israelis responded with sadness. Dr. Ezzeldeen Abu Al-Aish's home was shelled by the IDF with his family inside. At least three of his daughters were killed, adding to the estimated 1,300 mostly Palestinian civilian deaths. I watched Israeli reaction on television as some sent words of condolences while others charged that the doctor's home would not have been bombed if he did not have weapons inside. I also watched images of Israelis gathering at the Gaza-Israel border. Some wanted to support the Israeli army through their presence. Others brought picnics and simply wanted to watch the bombs as they dropped on Gaza.

Perhaps it was merely a coincidence, but our Canadian flag was nowhere to be seen throughout my stay in Ramallah. It is usually prominently displayed at the Representative Office in central Ramallah, but the flag was absent every time I walked by. And on Fridays, when Palestinians in Ramallah planned to march through the streets to show their solidarity with people in Gaza, the Canadian Representative Office was surrounded by security officers. Judging by their uniforms, these guards included both private firms and Palestinian security forces. Officials at the Representative Office have likely not forgotten that our office was riddled with bullets—I saw the holes—shortly after Canada became the first country to impose sanctions against Palestinians in 2006.

Yet Palestinians within with whom I spoke were clearly touched by acts and statements from Canadian people. Academics welcomed the statement issued by the Canadian Association of University Teachers in support of Palestinian academic freedom and against Israel's attacks on Palestinian universities. Ordinary people welcomed the heroic occupation of the Israeli consulate in Toronto by Judy Rebick and other Jewish women. Palestinians with whom I spoke saw these gestures as meaningful acts of humanity—a signal that the world had not abandoned them and that it was, to some degree, not blind to their suffering.

Palestinians, however, are still trying to come to grips with Canada's official position. Canada was the only country to vote against a UN Resolution authorizing, among other things, a fact-finding mission to be dispatched to Gaza. At the same time, Canada last year had announced a \$300-million aid package designed in part to provide training for officials associated with Mahmoud Abbas's government in the West Bank. How much aid will be doled out for the immediate needs in Gaza clearly remains to be seen. The entire infrastructure of Gaza has been demolished—agriculture, schools, hospitals, transport and sanitation systems have all collapsed with an estimated price tag of \$1.9 billion attributable to Operation Cast Lead.

One high-ranking Palestinian official told me that Canada would be better placed to demonstrate its own respect for the rule of law and hold all violators of the Geneva Conventions to account rather than helping to shield Israel from accountability or blaming Hamas.

"We don't need Canada to play politics—there is more than enough politics here. We need Canada to respect international law," he said. Indeed, one of the daily Arabic newspapers

reported last week that the Palestinian Authority had sent a strongly worded letter to the Canadian government as a protest against our failure to uphold international law.

How will people living in Gaza overcome the trauma? How will they rebuild? What will be the political legacy of Operation Cast Lead?

The last three weeks have generated uncertainty in many realms, but it has also helped reveal some realities. As one European analyst put it to me shortly before I left Ramallah: "One thing is very clear now: Nations that are not part of the humanitarian and political solution are part of the problem. Being part of the solution means respecting international law and paying attention to the very real rights claims and immediate needs of the Palestinian people rather than catering to the political whims of one group over another."

Professor Reem Bahdi teaches access to justice and tort law at the University of Windsor. She has worked in Ramallah in various capacities for more than 13 years.

editor@embassymag.ca