

ORSAM REVIEW OF REGIONAL AFFAIRS

NO.8, JULY 2014



HUMANITARIAN TRAGEDY IN GAZA

HALİL İBRAHİM YENİGÜN

Halil İbrahim Yenigün is an assistant professor of political theory in the Political Science & International Relations department at Istanbul Commerce University. He received his Ph.D. in 2013 from the University of Virginia's (UVA) political theory program. He spent the 2007-2008 academic year as a Malone & Gallatin research fellow in the Middle Eastern Studies Center at American University in Cairo (AUC). Yenigün has published articles, book reviews, and opinion pieces in journals such as İnsan ve Toplum (People & Society), Divan, The Virginia Quarterly Review (VQR), and AJISS. He gave interviews to several magazines and newspapers in Turkey about the contemporary Muslim political thought. Yenigün also serves as a founding member and general coordinator at Istanbul Think-house (Istanbul Düşünce Evi- IDE) and foreign relations committee coordinator at MAZLUMDER Human Rights Association.

With the loss of over 900 lives, it is yet another case where innocent civilians pay the price for the misguided strategic calculations of the political players. Indeed ever since the occupation of Iraq by the American forces in 2003, the MENA region has witnessed several occupations, civil wars, coups, and countless sectarian massacres and other acts of violence, as a result of which over a million civilians lost their lives. "Collateral damage" is the euphemism that often degrades the value of these lives, substituted for the outright massacre. As turmoil has prevailed on a quite wide geography, the decade long-plight of the recent past may have exceeded any other decade in the region's recent history in terms of the extensiveness of bloodshed. On the bright side, one may seek consolation with the few remaining experimentations with democracy.

The Road to Operation Protective Edge: Revenge Killings?

Amidst this bleak picture, the Palestinian question goes through its regular cycles. The latest Israeli assault, codenamed “Operation Protective Edge,” seemed to be triggered by the June 12 kidnapping and murder of three yeshiva students,¹ for which Israel vowed to “avenge their blood.”² One would normally expect that these murders in the West Bank must have led to an ordinary criminal investigation and legal prosecution. However, without providing sufficient evidence that the initial kidnappings were authorized by Hamas leadership or the suspects occupied any official positions in the organization, Israel held

Hamas as well as the whole Palestinian authority responsible.³ It eventually became clear that the initial murders simply served as a pretext for what turned out to be a carefully planned offensive, as weeks later Israeli officials revealed that “they had been studying for a year to plan a way to destroy” the tunnels.⁴

The Human Rights Violations in the West Bank and Humanitarian Tragedy in Gaza

During the following weeks, the by-standing onlookers were struck by the enormity of human rights violations, war crimes, and severe violations of the international humanitarian law in particular.⁵ Right after the murders, during a series of what seemed



to be “revenge operations,” Israeli occupation forces started off by demolishing the apartments of the alleged suspects, arrested hundreds of Palestinians who had been released on a prior prisoner exchange,⁶ searched over 2000 locations, and stole cash and property worth an estimated \$3 million, which alone was considered a grave violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention.⁷ During this initial stage in the West Bank, several civilians and a handicapped man were killed.⁸ In the meantime, the widespread hate-mongering official rhetoric⁹ went on full scale even after the tragic murder of the 16-year-old Muhammed Abu Khdeir¹⁰ by some settler fanatics who burnt him alive.¹¹

Subsequently, Israeli occupation forces turned to Gaza by launching the Operation Protective Edge on July 7 by tank shelling and airstrikes. While Hamas was accused of committing war crimes by indiscriminately launching rockets to Israel, Israeli assaults were reported to have targeted disproportionately homes and residential areas in one of the most densely populated areas in the world, as a clear violence of international humanitarian law.¹² Israeli officials failed to prove the military

necessity to bomb Palestinian homes, as, for instance, no secondary explosions were documented indicating that the houses were used for weapons storage.¹³ In one shocking incident, Israel targeted human shields who were trying to protect their Kaware family home from being destroyed, killing seven innocent civilians, including as many as six children and injuring another 25.¹⁴ In some other instances Israeli warplanes hit houses, labeling them as “terrorist hide-outs”, which itself is a form of summary execution. All in all, civilian-populated areas and civilian facilities were consistently shot, killing mostly civilians and damaging tens of civilian infrastructures, including schools, hospitals, a rehabilitation center for the handicapped, and a relief agency warehouse.¹⁵ Many reports by the UN¹⁶ as well as other international human rights groups concluded that the operation on the whole amounted to collective punishment.¹⁷

The ground invasion that started ten days later with the declared aim of destroying the tunnels used by Palestinian fighters and continuing “as long as necessary”¹⁸ only exacerbated the humanitarian tragedy. The UN’s Office for

It eventually became clear that the initial murders simply served as a pretext for what turned out to be a carefully planned offensive

the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) declared that, as of July 21, 149 children had been killed (compared with 87 confirmed members of the armed groups).¹⁹ In just a single day on July 21, during what came to be known as Shuja'iyyeh Massacre, 65 Palestinians, almost half of whom were women and children, got killed as opposed to 13 Israeli occupation forces.²⁰ The infamous targeting of Al-Aqsa hospital during the ground invasion after the previous week's attack on al-Wafa led to calls by the Amnesty International for the "need for a prompt, impartial international investigation mandated by the U.N."²¹ So far, while destruction of Palestinian homes left tens of thousands of people homeless, the ground invasion has risked a public health

catastrophe by leaving 1.2 million people without water or sewage services. According to the U.N. reports, mass displacement as a result of the ground incursions continues across Gaza, with over 117,000 IDPs now seeking shelter in UNRWA schools and additional thousands in Ministry of Education-run schools.²² In their defense, Israeli officials repeatedly said that they warned the civilians to evacuate the area days before it was attacked, but the Amnesty reports maintain that many civilians simply have nowhere else to go as all shelters are overflowing.²³ The fact that even the emergency shelters were shelled by the Israeli strikes on July 24 killing of up to 30 people leaves little credibility with the occupation forces' claims. Adding to the deadly strikes against civilian residential



areas, Gaza's medical facilities and personnel are ill-equipped to cope with the large numbers of casualties. This problem is a direct consequence of the Egyptian and Israeli blockade, although it was very slightly eased for the passage of the emergency supplies during the latest stage. Gazan people had already been victimized by what amounts to collective punishment due to the Egyptian and Israeli blockade following the Hamas victory in 2007 elections.²⁴ Since the coup in Egypt last year, the border closure was even more intensified with the clear aim to drive Hamas, a progeny of the Muslim Brotherhood and the archenemy of Egyptian military, into a crippling financial crisis.

Victims Winning the War of Public Opinion

The humanitarian disasters that resulted from Israel's Gaza operation and the overwhelming percentage of children and women victims have aggravated a great many onlookers all around the world. The Israeli strike that killed four Palestinian boys on a beach in Gaza and the subsequent rewriting of its title by the New York Times into an ambiguous one outraged many others.²⁵ On a similar note,

Ayman Mohyeldin was pulled off by NBC from Gaza after his coverage of the beach killings, followed by his reinstatement due to wide uproars, which led to interpretations that he was singled out for his empathetic stories for Palestinians.²⁶ The sea change among the general public worried even the Israeli ambassador to the US as he remarked that "Hamas could win war of public opinion."²⁷

Yet again, the common rhetoric of "Israel's right to self-defense," copiously used by governments to justify the widely reported human rights violations, seems to alienate many people in the world from their governments, international organizations, and even from the discourse of human rights and democracy. Defenders of the Israeli side persistently claim that Israel adhered to the Geneva Convention's demand for providing "effective advance warning" to civilians and that it is Hamas that violated the rule forbidding parties to "direct the movement of ...civilians in order to shield military objectives from attack."²⁸ However, as Eyal Weizman documents, the warning shots, sometimes responsible for the fatalities themselves, have been consistently abused in order to enable attacks where attacks should not be undertaken at

While destruction of Palestinian homes left tens of thousands of people homeless, the ground invasion has risked a public health catastrophe by leaving 1.2 million people without water or sewage services



all. In effect they serve to give the Israeli military freehand to expand the depleted bank of targets, and in turn result in the proliferation of violence.²⁹ Likewise, it is simply impossible to build a case for any justified targeting of medical centers, which has turned into a systematic punitive or revengeful instrument resorted to by the Israeli army. Hamas's indiscriminate rocket firings are of course getting their fair share of condemnation by international observers as a violation of the international law. However holding Palestinians responsible for their own bloodshed would appear to be blaming the victim to many in the world, when Palestinian fatalities to Israelis are no less than 300 to 1 and the percentage of civilian fatalities is no less than 75% of all, compared to 2 Israeli civilian fatalities caused by the Palestinian attacks. In the face of this striking gap, self-defense rhetoric

on behalf of the Israeli occupation will only estrange the Arab and the Muslim world, or the South in general, from the international law or human rights and democracy discourse. This could further undermine the credibility of the international institutions, which would in effect create more cynicism and unwillingness among the less developed countries towards finding a common ground and cooperating for the human rights work.

Repressing Ikhwan, Liquidating Hamas: The Repercussions of the Egyptian Spring's Failures for Palestine

Aside from an account of the ongoing conflict from a humanitarian dimension, the situation in Gaza can be put in better context if the changing regional dynamics in the post-Arab Spring Egypt

are also taken into consideration. Hamas's electoral victory in 2007 and the subsequent devastating blockade against Gaza, coupled with the fragmented governance of the Palestinian territories, constitute the old *status quo* in the pre-Arab Spring Palestine. The Arab Spring did not seem to have changed the major fault lines inside Palestine. However, it may be argued that the current offensive was foreshadowed and even enabled by certain large scale tectonic changes in the wider region that brought Egyptian and Israeli military together on the common goal of liquidating their archenemy Hamas (read as Muslim Brotherhood by the Egyptian military).³⁰ What precipitated the assault, in this view, was the rapprochement between the President Mahmoud Abbas and Hamas, which had even gained the indirect support of the US and the EU.³¹ Indeed, the reconciliation agreement of April 23, 2014 that would bring about Fatah dominated unity government's take-over of Gaza could have the chance to end the isolation of Gaza and the humanitarian crisis in the tiny strip of 1.8 million residents.³² But this very development and its potential consequences inside Palestine would foil Egypt and Israel's

intentions to get rid of Hamas as a major political actor. This must have led them to believe that, as Azzam Tamimi suggests, it was their call for an offensive against Gaza.³³ Otherwise it was very well known that Hamas was effectively ensuring the maintenance of the ceasefire, by even holding back the attacks by smaller factions, as the Hamas-led government direly needed to ease the grim situation that has hardly hit the Gazans. Perhaps this is the reason why Hamas threw fewer rockets from Gaza in 2013 than in any year since 2001³⁴ and Hamas retaliated only when Israeli forces killed a Hamas operative by an air strike on June 29, which would mark the end the 2012 ceasefire.³⁵

It is against this background, I argue, that the ceasefire efforts mediated by Egypt must be understood. Eventually, it only served to give freer hand and purportedly assign greater legitimacy to Israel's ground incursions. As Mouin Rabbani also suggested, "there is widespread Palestinian suspicion that Egypt [had] released a proposal it ensured would be acceptable to Israel but rejected by the Palestinians, in order to help Israel legitimize an escalation of attacks against the Gaza Strip."³⁶

The common rhetoric of "Israel's right to self-defense," copiously used by governments to justify the widely reported human rights violations, seems to alienate many people in the world from their governments, international organizations, and even from the discourse of human rights and democracy

With the continuing strikes and ground operations amidst the mounting human cost, Israel, backed by Egypt's post-coup government, seems to have taken its chances to restore its own *status quo ante* in the post-Arab spring MENA region. While each one of Hamas and Muslim Brotherhood must usually be analyzed in their own terms without projecting one's dynamics onto other, it seems warranted in this particular case that the mishaps of the Arab Spring and the ongoing crack-down in Egypt on MB have a lot to do with Israel's aim of the so-called "demilitarization of Gaza."

How to Get Out? Time for a Humanitarian and Ethical Struggle for Peace

Then what is the way out of this grim deadlock of the regional

power games that have not benefited any of the regional actors in any significant manner but instead hit the Palestinian people drastically? With the regional players pursuing their own domestic agendas and maximizing regional interests to further their respective positions in the several different conflict zones, Palestinians seem to have been largely left to their own devices. That is why, as Levy also argued, several mediation efforts could not go beyond reflecting the changing fault lines in the region driven by different and self-interested goals.³⁷ This was the equation that Israel capitalized on to enjoy more latitude with its deadly incursions without impunity.

But on the bright side the political deadlock of the regional players might offer unexpected opportunities for the non-state, civilian forces in the region. De-



spite the disillusionments with the post-revolutionary and counter-revolutionary trends in the region, the social forces that were unleashed by the Arab spring, for instance, might engage in a much more effective BDS campaign³⁸ on a much more vibrant ground. Perhaps it is now the time³⁹ to respond to the humanitarian crisis in Palestine through much stronger humanitarian and ethical means.

References

- ¹ The Times of Israel, "Bereaved mother offers condolences to slain Arab teen's family," July 7, 2014, <http://www.timesofisrael.com/rachelle-fraenkel-offers-condolences-to-abu-khdeirs-family/> (accessed: July 21, 2014).
- ² Jacquie Kubin, "UPDATE: Sons of Israel, Gilad Shaar, Eyal Yifrach and Naftali Fraenkel, found murdered," Communities Digital News, June 30, 2014, <http://www.commdiginews.com/news-2/sons-of-israel-gilad-shaar-eyal-yifrach-and-naftali-fraenkel-found-murdered-20608/> (accessed: July 21, 2014).
- ³ Jodi Rudoren and Said Ghazali, "A Trail of Clues Leading to Victims and Heartbreak: Israeli Teenagers Found Dead; Hamas Under Pressure," The New York Times, July 1, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/02/world/middleeast/details-emerge-in-deaths-of-israeli-teenagers.html> (accessed: July 21, 2014).
- ⁴ Anne Barnard and Jodi Rudoren, "Despite Israeli Push in Gaza, Hamas Fighters Slip Through Tunnels," The New York Times, July 19, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/20/world/middleeast/gaza-israel.html> (accessed: July 22, 2014).
- ⁵ Amnesty International, "Israel/Gaza: Attacks on Medical Facilities and Civilians Add to War Crime Allegations," July 21, 2014, <http://www.amnestyusa.org/news/press-releases/israelgaza-attacks-on-medical-facilities-and-civilians-add-to-war-crime-allegations-0> (accessed: July 22, 2014).
- ⁶ Jodi Rudoren and Said Ghazali, "A Trail of Clues."
- ⁷ Euro-Mid Observer for Human Rights, "Report: Israeli forces stole USD 3 million in cash, property from Palestinians during West Bank raids," July 8, 2014 <http://www.euromid.org/en/article/533/Report:-Israeli-forces-stole-USD-3-million-in-cash--property-from-Palestinians-during-West-Bank-raids> (accessed: July 22, 2014).
- ⁸ Gavriel Fiske, "Netanyahu: Hard evidence Hamas behind kidnappings," The Times of Israel, June 22, 2014, <http://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-hard-evidence-hamas-behind-kidnappings/> (accessed: July 22, 2014).

⁹ Gideon Resnick, "Israeli Politician Declares 'War' on 'the Palestinian People,'" *The Daily Beast*, July 7, 2014, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/07/07/israeli-politician-declares-war-on-the-palestinian-people.html> (accessed: July 22, 2014).

¹⁰ *The Times of Israel*, "Bereaved mother offers condolences."

¹¹ Peter Beaumont, "Palestinian boy Mohammed Abu Khdeir was burned alive, says official," *The Guardian*, July 5, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jul/05/palestinian-boy-mohammed-abu-khdeir-burned-alive> (accessed: July 22, 2014).

¹² "Alarmed at rising death toll in Gaza, UN rights officials appeal to all sides to protect civilians," *UN News Centre*, July 11, 2014, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=48249#.U8JVKBKRGSo> (accessed: July 22, 2014).

¹³ Palestinian Center for Human Rights, "Israeli forces engaged in punitive destruction of homes in the Gaza Strip," *International Solidarity Movement*, July 10, 2014, <http://palsolidarity.org/2014/07/israeli-forces-engaged-in-punitive-destruction-of-homes-in-the-gaza-strip/> (accessed: July 22, 2014).

¹⁴ Steven Erlanger and Fares Akram, "Israel Warns Gaza Targets by Phone and Leaflet," July 8, 2014,

<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/09/world/middleeast/by-phone-and-leaflet-israeli-attackers-warn-gazans.html> (accessed: July 22, 2014).

¹⁵ Aljazeera, "Israel bomb hits disabled centre in Gaza" July 13, 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/07/israel-bombs-hit-centre-disabled-gaza-201471274035753506.html> (accessed: July 23, 2014).

¹⁶ OCHA, "Protection of Civilians: Weekly Report 24-30 JUNE 2014" http://www.ochaopt.org/documents/ocha_opt_protection_of_civilians_weekly_report_2014_7_04_english.pdf (accessed: July 23, 2014).

¹⁷ Human Rights Watch, "Palestine/Israel: Indiscriminate Palestinian Rocket Attacks," July 9, 2014, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/07/09/palestineisrael-indiscriminate-palestinian-rocket-attacks> (accessed: July 21, 2014).

¹⁸ Yosef Berger, "Netanyahu: Anti-Tunnel Operation to End 'Fairly Soon'" *Arutz Sheva*, July 20, 2014, <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/183113> (accessed: July 22, 2014).

¹⁹ Richard Spencer, and David Blair, "Israel's offensive in Gaza has 'killed more children than fighters', say human rights groups," *The Telegraph*, July 22, 2014, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/israel/10984451/Israels->

offensive-in-Gaza-has-killed-more-children-than-fighters-say-human-rights-groups.html (accessed: July 25, 2014).

²⁰ ABC7 News, “Thousands flee as Israeli troops, tanks, warplanes attack Hamas in Gaza City neighborhood,” July 20, <http://www.wjla.com/articles/2014/07/thousands-flee-as-israeli-troops-tanks-warplanes-attack-hamas-in-gaza-city-neighborhood-105243.html> (Accessed: July 24)

²¹ Amnesty International, “Israel/Gaza: Attacks on Medical Facilities and Civilians Add to War Crime Allegations,” July 21, 2014. <http://www.amnestyusa.org/news/press-releases/israelgaza-attacks-on-medical-facilities-and-civilians-add-to-war-crime-allegations-0> (accessed: July 26, 2014).

²² OCHA, “Occupied Palestinian Territory: Gaza Emergency Situation Report (as of 22 July 2014, 1500 hrs)” http://www.ochaopt.org/documents/ocha_opt_sitrep_23_07_2014.pdf (accessed: July 24, 2014).

²³ Amnesty International, “Israel/Gaza: Attacks on Medical Facilities and Civilians.

²⁴ ABC7 News, “Thousands flee as Israeli troops”

²⁵ Peter Hart, “NYT Rewrites Gaza Headline: Was It Too Accurate?” Fair, July 17, 2014, [http://www.fair.org/blog/2014/07/17/nyt-](http://www.fair.org/blog/2014/07/17/nyt-rewrites-gaza-headline-was-it-too-accurate/)

[rewrites-gaza-headline-was-it-too-accurate/](http://www.fair.org/blog/2014/07/17/nyt-rewrites-gaza-headline-was-it-too-accurate/) (Accessed: July 25, 2014).

²⁶ Brian Stelter, “What really happened with NBC and Ayman Mohyeldin,” July 20, 2014, <http://money.cnn.com/2014/07/20/media/ayman-mohyeldin-nbc-news/> (Accessed: July 25, 2014)

²⁷ Debra Nussbaum Cohen, “Hamas could win war of public opinion,” Haaretz, July 16, 2014, <http://www.haaretz.com/jewish-world/jewish-world-news/.premium-1.605502> (Accessed: July 25, 2014).

²⁸ Anne Bayefsky, “Ban Ki-moon’s shameful message in Israel’s hour of need,” The Jerusalem Post, July 22, 2014, <http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Columnists/Ban-Ki-moons-shameful-message-in-Israelis-hour-of-need-368415> (accessed: July 25, 2014).

²⁹ Eyal Weizman, “Gaza attacks: Lethal warnings,” Aljazeera, July 14, 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/07/gaza-attacks-lethal-warnings-2014713162312604305.html> (accessed: July 20, 2014).

³⁰ Daniel Levy, “Why a Gaza cease-fire could reinforce long-term conflict,” Aljazeera America, July 19, 2014, <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2014/7/19/gaza-ceasefire-israel.html> (accessed: July 20, 2014).

³¹ Azzam Tamimi, “The slaughter in Gaza will not defeat Hamas,” The Guardian, July 13, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jul/13/gaza-ceasefire-hamas>

www.theguardian.com/commentis-free/2014/jul/13/israel-deadly-gaza-gamble (accessed: July 20, 2014).

³² International Crisis Group, “Gaza and Israel: New Obstacles, New Solutions,” July 14, 2014, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Israel%20Palestine/b039-gaza-and-israel-new-obstacles-new-solutions.pdf> (accessed: July 20, 2014).

³³ Azzam Tamimi, “The slaughter in Gaza.”

³⁴ International Crisis Group, “Gaza and Israel: New Obstacles, New Solutions.”

³⁵ J.J. Goldberg, “How Politics and Lies Triggered an Unintended War in Gaza,” The Jewish Daily For-

ward, July 10, 2014, <http://forward.com/articles/201764/how-politics-and-lies-triggered-an-unintended-war/> (accessed: July 12, 2014).

³⁶ Daniel Levy, “Why a Gaza Cease-Fire.”

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Omar Barghouti, “Why Israel Fears the Boycott,” January 31, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/01/opinion/sunday/why-the-boycott-movement-scares-israel.html> (accessed: July 20, 2014).

³⁹ Naomi Klein, “Enough. It’s time for a boycott,” The Guardian, January 10, 2009, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2009/jan/10/naomi-klein-boycott-israel> (accessed: July 20, 2014).

ORSAM is an independent think-tank specializing on Middle Eastern affairs. ORSAM seeks to diversify sources of knowledge on the region and establish a channel of communication between the local experts and Turkish academic and policy circles. Toward that end, ORSAM facilitates the exchanges of officials, academics, strategists, journalists, businesspeople and members of civil society from the region with their Turkish counterparts. ORSAM conducts studies on the regional developments and disseminates their results to the policy and academic circles as well as the wider public through various publication outlets. ORSAM publications include books, reports, bulletins, newsletters, policy briefs, conference minutes and two journals *Ortadoğu Analiz* and *Ortadoğu Etütleri*.

© Content of this report is copyrighted to ORSAM. Except reasonable and partial quotation and use under the Act No. 5846, Law on Intellectual and Artistic Works, via proper citation, the content may not be used or re-published without prior permission by ORSAM. The views expressed in this report reflect only the opinions of its authors and do not represent the institutional opinion of ORSAM.



Ortadoğu Stratejik Araştırmalar Merkezi (ORSAM)
Süleyman Nazif Sokak No: 12-B Çankaya / Ankara
Tel: 0 (312) 430 26 09 Fax: 0 (312) 430 39 48
www.orsam.org.tr