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# The Media Narrative on Palestine and Israel

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The outbreak of violence in Gaza has been the top story in the mainstream media here in the United States for three days in a row now, and yet I have yet to come across a single news item from any of the major newspapers or television news outlets that mentions the total number of Israelis killed by Hamas's Qassam rockets since the official collapse of the cease fire on December 19th. Mention is made of one Israeli man killed this week and half a dozen wounded, and all articles state that at least 110 Qassam rockets have been launched into Israel since Saturday morning, with some quoting the IDF putting the figure at 300 rockets for the past week. But not once is the total of Israelis killed given. The closest precise figure I was able to dig out was from a December 31, 2007, article published in the IDF's web site that stated, "since 2001 until today, rocket and mortar fire originating in the Gaza Strip has caused the deaths of 20 people." [1]

So, why not? Why is this very basic fact missing? How can anyone observing the conflict draw any meaningful conclusions about whether accusations against Israeli actions are indeed an aggression against a whole people rather than an act of self defense, as Israel and the United States claim?

Also missing is the basic fact that this round of attacks and counter attacks started on November 4th, when Israel decided to cross into the Gaza Strip to destroy what the army claimed was a tunnel dug by Hamas. [2] Up to then, the cease fire had been holding up reasonably well, notwithstanding Israel's continuing strangulation of Gaza. The Israeli breach into Gaza was followed by further violence from Israel when the Israeli government the next day sealed off all ways into and out of Gaza. As a result, according to Oxfam International, between November 5th and November 30th, only 23 trucks were allowed into Gaza (down from an average of 3,000 trucks per month), which represents about 6 per cent of the traffic needed to sustain the starving Palestinian population of 1.5 million in the tiny strip. [3a] Instead, the narrative deployed by the US media continues to be the usual safe and lazy one where Israel is simply defending itself and "retaliating" against the aggression of terrorists. Little room or credence is given to the open declarations of the Palestinians that the violence was started and deliberately sustained by Israel, that the Palestinians have several times asserted that they "would only respond to Israeli aggression," [3b] and that it was Israel that "had breached agreements by imposing a painful economic blockade on Gaza, staging military strikes into the densely populated coastal strip and continuing to hunt down Hamas operatives in the West Bank." [4]

Several other inconvenient facts routinely go unmentioned. For instance, the basic fact that the strip is 25 miles long and 4 to 7.5 miles wide, that 1.5 million people live in that tiny patch of land, that it is completely sealed off by a land barrier erected by Israel, and that Israel controls both the air space over the strip and the maritime border with the Mediterranean – all of that is usually left unmentioned. [5]

Also often missing from the narrative is the fact that Hamas was democratically elected when it won by large majorities (76 of the 132 parliamentary seats) in both Gaza and the West Bank in the internationally monitored Palestinian Authority's parliamentary elections in early 2006 [6], and that immediately upon winning those

elections, the United States and Israel, caught completely off guard and backtracking at once on their up to then vociferous rhetoric that what would cure the ills of Palestine would be free, open and democratic elections, declared that they would not deal with Hamas, in spite of clear signs from the Hamas leadership that there was plenty of room to enter into a constructive engagement. [7]

Virtually always missing from almost all of the stories is the context of internal Israeli politics. It would be helpful for a reader, for instance, to know that elections to choose a successor to disgraced Prime Minister Ehud Olmert are only six weeks away, and that both Defense Minister Ehud Barak and Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni are positioning their parties against Likud's Benjamin Netanyahu (Labor and Kadima respectively), who currently leads in the poll. [8] "Crushing" Hamas and highlighting a contrast between them and the outgoing Prime minister and his disastrous adventure in Lebanon two years ago is key, they believe, to having a chance against the more hawkish Likud.

Of course, I suppose it would be too much to expect the US media to remember that in April 1996, then interim Prime Minister Shimon Peres (Yitzhak Rabin had been assassinated five months earlier) , running for the post of Prime Minister for the fourth time (he had lost the previous three times) and desperately trying to bolster his weak military credentials in anticipation of the upcoming elections in May, engaged in a sixteen-day military blitz against Lebanon in the name of ending the shelling of Northern Israel by Hezbollah. The campaign accomplished nothing except the killing of Lebanese civilians, 118 of whom were massacred in Qana while they sought refuge in a UN compound. Labor's Peres lost those elections to Likud's Netanyahu and in May 2000 Israel withdrew from the strip of Lebanon it had been occupying for nearly 20 years.

It is high time that the absurd narrative of little Israel fighting for its survival against murderous Arabs is set aside once and for all. Instead, let us remember the basics of the situation whenever we try to understand the events in Palestine and Israel: a mighty nuclear power is occupying and punishing a dispossessed people simply because it does not have the political imagination, will, and courage to sit down and make the difficult decisions necessary to reach a lasting solution.

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Notes:

[1] "30 % Rise in Qassam Rocket Fire," IDF Annual Report 2007, December 31, 2007. <http://dover.idf.il/IDF/English/2007/3106.htm>

[2] "Israel-Hamas cease-fire in peril as violence rises," Joel Greenberg, The Chicago Tribune, November 17, 2008.  
[http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/chi-israel-gaza\\_greenbergnov17,0,7989972.story](http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/chi-israel-gaza_greenbergnov17,0,7989972.story)

[3a] "If Gaza Falls," Sara Roy, The London Review of Books, January 2009 issue.  
[http://www.lrb.co.uk/v31/n01/roy\\_01\\_.html](http://www.lrb.co.uk/v31/n01/roy_01_.html)

[3b] "Agreement in Hamas: Cease-fire to end Friday," Avi Issacharoff and Amos Harel, Haaretz, December 12, 2008.  
<http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1046923.html>

[4] "Hamas renounces cease-fire with Israel," The Associated Press, December 19, 2008. <http://www.iht.com/articles/2008/12/19/mideast/mideast.php>

[5] "Israel strikes Hamas targets in Gaza, 271 dead," Richard Boudreaux and Rushdi abu Alouf, The Los Angeles Times, December 28, 2008.  
<http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-gaza28-2008dec28,0,427782.story>

[6] "Hamas Sweeps Palestinian Elections, Complicating Peace Efforts in Mideast," Scott Wilson, January 27, 2006.  
<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/01/26/AR2006012600372.html>

[7] "Siegman: U.S., Israel and EU Must Deal With Hamas If it Drops Harsh Policies Toward Israel," council on Foreign Relations, January 27, 2006.  
<http://www.cfr.org/publication/9693/siegman.html>

[8] "Israel strikes Hamas targets in Gaza, 271 dead," Richard Boudreaux and Rushdi abu Alouf, The Los Angeles Times, December 28, 2008.  
<http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-gaza28-2008dec28,0,427782.story>

[9] [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation\\_Grapes\\_of\\_Wrath](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation_Grapes_of_Wrath)

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