



INTERNATIONAL LAW AND THE FIGHTING IN GAZA

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INTRODUCTION

Palestinian terrorists in Gaza continue to launch rocket and mortar attacks on Israeli civilians and, in response, Israel has re-imposed a number of controls at its border with Gaza.³ At times Israel has responded to the projectile and terrorist attacks emanating from Gaza by reducing the fuel and electricity that it supplies to that region. An upsurge in Palestinian attacks led to more intensified Israeli military action in Gaza which commenced as this study went to press.⁴

As with every flare-up of the Arab-Israeli conflict, the air is thick with accusations of violations of international law. The halls of the United Nations resound with voices objecting to the alleged illegality of Israel's behavior, and legal "experts" have taken to the airwaves to raise accusations of wrongdoing.⁵ For instance, UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs John Holmes asserted that "the effective Israeli isolation of Gaza...amounts to collective punishment and is contrary to international humanitarian law."⁶ Similarly, organizations such as Amnesty International have issued erroneous and misguided criticism, including "condemning" Israel's imposition of all "blockades" on the Gaza Strip as "collective punishment."⁷ Jeremy Hobbs, Director of Oxfam International, called on Israel "immediately [to] lift its inhumane and illegal siege."⁸

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This briefing paper explores the many international legal issues raised by the Palestinian-Israeli tension along Gaza's borders. It first examines legal issues raised by Palestinian conduct and then turns to legal issues raised by Israeli conduct. As will be demonstrated, criticisms of Israeli behavior such as mentioned above lack any basis in international law. By contrast, criticisms that ought to be voiced about illegal Palestinian behavior are markedly rare.

PALESTINIAN ATTACKS FROM GAZA

Since Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip in August 2005, Palestinian groups, including Hamas, Fatah, Palestine Islamic Jihad, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, and the Popular Resistance Committees have launched more than 6,000 mortar and rocket attacks on Israel.⁹ With no more than a handful of possible exceptions, all the attacks have been on civilian targets.¹⁰



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A cease-fire agreement between Israel and Hamas from June 19 to December 18, 2008, greatly reduced, but failed to eliminate entirely, attacks on Israeli civilian targets. During the cease-fire, Palestinian terrorists launched several dozen Qassam rocket and mortar attacks.¹¹ Since Hamas declared an end to the cease-fire, Palestinian terrorists have launched hundreds of rocket and mortar attacks at civilian Israeli targets.¹²

While several Israeli cities and towns have been attacked, the brunt of the Palestinian assault has been borne by the town of Sderot, which has been bombarded by terrorist projectiles an average of more than twice a day during the last two and a half years.¹³ The attacks have killed several residents and injured dozens of others. The attacks have destroyed houses and public buildings such as kindergartens. The residents are so traumatized that three-quarters of all Sderot children between the ages of 7 and 12 suffer from post-traumatic anxiety.¹⁴

Illegality of Palestinian Attacks Under the Laws of War and Terrorism

While Palestinian attacks from Gaza clearly violate many provisions of international law, the attacks have drawn little more than *pro forma* objections from international observers. For instance, a search of the UN UNISPAL database (the United Nations Information System on the Question of Palestine) revealed dozens of UN documents issued in the last year concerning Gaza. Yet only one document was discovered — a letter from Israeli diplomats to senior UN officials following a Palestinian terror attack¹⁵ — whose primary and direct focus was Palestinian violations of international law.¹⁶ This disturbing silence cannot be justified on the grounds that controversy exists regarding the legality of Palestinian actions, since it is quite clear that the Palestinian attacks are contrary to the standards of international law.

The Palestinian attacks violate one of the most basic rules of international humanitarian law: the rule of distinction, which requires combatants to aim all their attacks at legitimate targets — enemy combatants or objects that contribute to enemy military actions.¹⁷ Violations of the rule of distinction — attacks deliberately aimed at civilians or protected objects as such — are war crimes.¹⁸

One of the corollaries of the rule of distinction is a ban on the use of weapons that are incapable, under the circumstances, of being properly aimed only at legitimate targets.¹⁹



The rockets and projectile weapons being used by the Palestinian attackers are primitive weapons that cannot be aimed at specific targets and must be launched at the center of urban areas. This means that the very use of the weapons under current circumstances violates international law.

The Palestinian attacks, because they are intended to kill or seriously injure civilians in order to intimidate a population, are also terrorist acts within the scope of the International Convention for the Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism.

Consequently, each one of the 6,000 attacks by Palestinian terrorists on civilian targets in Israeli towns is a war crime. Both the terror squads carrying out the attacks, as well as their commanders, bear criminal responsibility for these war crimes. Indeed, criminal responsibility for these crimes extends up the chain of command to the most senior officials in the terror groups who have approved these rocket attacks. Under the rules of command responsibility, senior Hamas leaders such as Khaled Mashal, who ordered a continuation of the rocket attacks in response to “Zionist crimes,”²⁰ are among the parties guilty of war crimes.²¹

The Palestinian attacks, because they are intended to kill or seriously injure civilians in order to intimidate a population, are also terrorist acts within the scope of the International Convention for the Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism.²² So long as the acts are committed by non-nationals of the target state,²³ Articles 2(4)-(5) extend liability to all those who:

- » attempt to commit;
- » participate as accomplices;
- » direct or organize terrorist acts; or
- » contribute to acts by terrorist groups with the knowledge of the groups’ intent to commit terror or with the aim of furthering their goals.

Thus, international law considers a large number of Palestinians related to the attacks to be terrorists: the squads of militants actually carrying out the rocket attacks, all those who assist the squads with organization or financing, and all those who finance the terrorists — such as the Palestinian Authority — since they are aware of the intent of the terror squads to carry out terrorist acts.

The Palestinian attacks must also be seen as terrorist attacks under a related international convention: the International Convention for the Suppression of Terrorist Bombings. This



convention makes it a crime to bomb public places (such as city streets) with the intent to kill civilians. This relates to bombings carried out by persons that are non-nationals of the state of which the victims are nationals.²⁴ Also under this Convention, the Palestinian attackers are considered international terrorists and Israel is required to assume criminal jurisdiction over them. Additionally, other states party to the Convention — such as the U.S., Russia, Turkey and France — must cooperate in helping to combat such Palestinian terrorist acts.

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Palestinian authorities in Gaza also violate anti-terrorism provisions of international law by providing a safe haven for Palestinian terrorists. UN Security Council Resolution 1566, which was adopted by authority of Chapter VII of the UN Charter and is therefore binding international law for all states, requires states to deny safe haven to “any person who supports, facilitates, participates or attempts to participate in the financing, planning, preparation or commission of terrorist acts or provides safe havens.”²⁵ Similarly, Security Council Resolution 1373, also a Chapter VII resolution, requires states to “deny safe haven to those who finance, plan, support, or commit terrorist acts, or provide safe havens.”²⁶ Together, these documents establish that, under international law, providing safe haven for terrorists is itself a criminal terrorist act. Thus, all Palestinian governing authorities in Gaza, whether directly involved in terror attacks or not, are criminal terrorists under international law, by virtue of their willing provision of safe haven for terrorists.

Palestinian war crimes do not end with terrorism and violations of the rules of distinction. As will be discussed later, Palestinian terrorists and fighters in Gaza have almost certainly violated the international humanitarian rule against perfidy. In addition, a consortium of Palestinian terrorist groups have held Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit incommunicado and out of reach of the International Committee of the Red Cross since 2006. This is a clear violation of international law concerning prisoners of war.

Illegality of Palestinian Attacks Under the Genocide Convention

In carrying out their attacks on Israeli Jews as part of a larger aim to kill Jews, as demonstrated by the Hamas Covenant, many of the Palestinian terrorists are also violating the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide. Under Article 1 of the Genocide Convention, Israel and other signatories are required to “prevent and punish” not only persons who carry out such genocidal acts, but those who conspire



with them, incite them to kill and are complicit with their actions.²⁷ The Convention thus requires Israel to prevent and punish the terrorists themselves, as well as leading figures that have publicly supported the Palestinian attacks. Article 2 of the Convention defines any killing with intent “to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such” as an act of genocide.²⁸

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The Hamas attacks fall within this definition of genocide. The Covenant of Hamas explicitly advocates a religious holy war aimed at creating a regional Islamic entity encompassing the territory of Israel and the disputed areas.²⁹ The Hamas Covenant not only calls for the movement to “liberate Palestine,” and in so doing to “raise the banner of Allah over every inch of Palestine” (Article 6),³⁰ but also demonstrates anti-Semitic murderous intent. Article 7, for instance, states that “the Day of Judgment will not come about until Moslems fight the Jews [killing the Jews], when the Jew will hide behind stones and trees. The stones and trees will say O Moslems, O Abdulla, there is a Jew behind me, come and kill him.”³¹ The text is infused with repulsive terminology such as, for example, the reference to “Zionist Nazis.”³² The Covenant’s Preamble also assures the world that “our struggle against the Jews is very great and very serious,” forecasting that “Israel will exist and will continue to exist until Islam will obliterate it, just as it obliterated others before it.”³³

The murderous intent of Hamas has been translated into a political program openly aimed at obliterating the Jewish state, as well as a constant stream of terrorist murders. During the three and a half years of fighting from September 2000 until March 2004, Hamas perpetrated 425 terrorist attacks. From those attacks, 377 Israelis were murdered and 2,076 civilians and soldiers were wounded.³⁴ Among the most infamous of these atrocities were the June 1, 2001, suicide bombing of a Tel Aviv discotheque, in which 21 people were murdered and 120 were wounded, and the March 27, 2002, suicide bombing of a hotel in Netanya on the first night of Passover, in which 30 people were murdered and 140 were wounded.³⁵ In this context it is not surprising that Hamas has failed to prevent projectile attacks during the six-month period of calm (Tahadiya³⁶).

LIMITED ISRAELI COUNTER-MEASURES

In contrast to the illegal Palestinian attacks from Gaza and the international silence that has greeted them, Israeli counter-measures have been both legal and, paradoxically, widely condemned. This regrettable pattern of largely overlooking actual Palestinian wrongdoing under international law, while vigorously condemning supposed Israeli wrongdoing, is tragically not unique to the situation in Gaza, but rather a persistent theme in the broader Arab-Israeli conflict.

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Israel's responses to Palestinian terrorist attacks and war crimes have been limited to far less than the full measure of actions Israel could legally have undertaken. Indeed, as will be demonstrated, Israel's responses may be properly criticized on the grounds of international law, if at all, for being insufficient rather than excessive.

Israel's primary measures of defending itself against Palestinian attacks from Gaza have included:

- » sealing off its borders with the Gaza Strip;
- » small-scale infantry and armored incursions to combat Palestinian snipers and bombers;
- » targeted air strikes on a small number of support, command and control targets;
- » economic sanctions such as the withholding of Israeli fuel; and
- » refusal to permit the use of Israel as a transit point for most non-emergency items.

Although there have been Palestinian casualties, most of the casualties have been Palestinian combatants.³⁷ In addition, Israel continues, as it has since its withdrawal from the Gaza Strip (and prior to that, by agreement with the PLO under the Oslo Accords), to maintain control of Gaza's airspace and coastal waters. By agreement with the Palestinian Authority and third parties, Israel also maintains a closed-circuit camera at the Palestinian-Egyptian border crossing at Rafah to monitor entries and exits into the Gaza Strip.³⁸ For its part, Egypt has generally kept the border closed between itself and the Gaza Strip, except for extensive arms smuggling through tunnels under the border.³⁹

Remarkably, even while engaged in these limited measures against Palestinian attacks from the Gaza Strip, and notwithstanding the fact that the Gaza Strip is under the



control of a terrorist organization as defined by the U.S. Department of State, Israel has continued to supply economic and humanitarian aid to Gaza. Israel provides fuel, electricity and water to the Gaza Strip, as well as medical services to seriously ill Gaza residents.⁴⁰ Israel has facilitated the travel of Gazans, such as students,⁴¹ to Europe and other destinations by permitting them to enter Israeli territory and use Israeli transit facilities.⁴² Israel has also provided funds to the Palestinian Authority, which has, in turn, disbursed them in Gaza.⁴³

Unfortunately, Hamas and other Palestinian terrorist groups utilized the cease-fire, as well as the limited nature of Israeli counter-strikes, to arm themselves for future terrorist strikes against Israeli Jews and armed actions against Israel.⁴⁴ It is therefore quite possible that Israel will be forced to engage in more intense counter-measures in the future.

FLAWED CRITICISMS MADE BY OPPONENTS OF ISRAEL

Traditional opponents of Israel have criticized it for alleged violations of international law. One of the strongest sources of criticism has been the Office of the “Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Palestinian Territories Occupied Since 1967” in the UN Human Rights Council. The Special Rapporteur’s office was created by the Human Rights Commission (since replaced by the Human Rights Council) in 1993 to issue one-sided criticisms of Israel; the mandate specifies that the Rapporteur is “[t]o investigate Israel’s [alleged] violations of...international law, international humanitarian law and the Geneva Convention...in the Palestinian territories occupied by Israel since 1967,” but does not request that he also investigate Palestinian violations.⁴⁵ The Rapporteur has used the one-sidedness of this mandate to justify anti-Israel bias in his reporting and has publicly and repeatedly interpreted his mandate as requiring him to criticize only Israel.⁴⁶ As befits the Rapporteur’s bias, the Rapporteur has ignored the fact that he has no jurisdiction to investigate alleged Israeli wrongdoing in Gaza. Since Israel’s withdrawal from Gaza in 2005, no credible legal argument can be made that Gaza is a “Palestinian territor[y] occupied by Israel since 1967.” The Rapporteur therefore lacks jurisdiction.

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Nonetheless, Rapporteur reports have been replete with inaccurate and biased criticism of alleged Israeli wrongdoing in Gaza. John Dugard, who served as the Special Rapporteur



from the inception of the post in 1993 until 2008, issued a statement on January 18, 2008, criticizing Israeli defense measures as illegal. Firstly, Dugard claimed that Israel's attack on a Hamas headquarters in a Palestinian Interior Ministry building in Gaza was illegal because the target was "near a wedding venue with what must have been foreseen loss of life and injury to many civilians."⁴⁷ However, the Palestinian Interior Ministry building was certainly a legitimate target under the rules of distinction since it makes a definite contribution to Hamas' hostilities. The fact that one Palestinian civilian lost her life in the Israeli strikes is unfortunate,⁴⁸ but certainly not a violation of the rule of proportionality, which authorizes collateral damage to civilians where justified by military necessity.⁴⁹

Secondly, Dugard asserted that Israel's closure of its borders with the Gaza Strip constitutes illegal "collective punishment."⁵⁰ Yet there is nothing in international law that requires Israel to maintain open borders with a hostile territory, whatever its sovereign status. Similarly, as will be discussed below, exercising legal counter-measures against a hostile entity does not constitute "collective punishment" under international law. Dugard's refusal to level the same charge against Egypt, which also closes its borders with the Gaza Strip at times, underlines the bias that accompanies this legally inaccurate statement.

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At the same time, in sharp contradiction to the dictates of international law, Dugard offered several invalid excuses for Palestinian terrorism. In his report of January 21, 2008, Dugard wrote that "[c]ommon sense...dictates that a distinction must be drawn between acts of mindless terror, such as acts committed by Al Qaeda, and acts committed in the course of a war of national liberation against colonialism, apartheid or military occupation....They must be understood as being a painful but inevitable consequence of colonialism, apartheid or occupation."⁵¹

Dugard failed to mention that such a distinction is forbidden by international law. Security Council Resolution 1566 specifically states that illegal terrorist acts "are under no circumstances justifiable by considerations of a political, philosophical, ideological, racial, ethnic, religious or other similar nature."⁵²

In a similar vein, in the same report, Dugard attempted to downplay Palestinian terrorism by omitting all mention of international conventions and resolutions violated by Palestinian terrorism. Instead he inaccurately accused Israel of committing illegal terrorism by, for example, targeting military strikes at Palestinian terrorists and flying

planes at supersonic speed.⁵³ Needless to say, there is no international law treaty, UN resolution or international legal custom that renders such Israeli acts as “terrorism” or illegal in any other way.

Difficult as it is to envisage, Richard Falk, Dugard’s successor to the post of Special Rapporteur, appears poised to surpass Dugard in bias and legal inaccuracy. Falk has repeatedly and outrageously accused Israel of genocide, claiming in 2002 that “Israel is seeking to obliterate the existence of the Palestinian people,”⁵⁴ and in 2007 that he felt “compelled to portray the ongoing and intensifying abuse of the Palestinian people by Israel” as a repeat of the Holocaust because Israeli policies “express so vividly a deliberate intention on the part of Israel and its allies to subject an entire human community to life-endangering conditions of utmost cruelty.”⁵⁵ Shortly after his appointment to the post of Special Rapporteur on March 28, 2008,⁵⁶ Falk defended the appropriateness of his comparisons of Israeli treatment of Gazans to genocidal Nazi policies.⁵⁷

To their credit, some foreign officials, such as Franco Frattini (until recently the European Commissioner for Justice, Freedom and Security),⁵⁸ have correctly defended the legality of the Israeli actions. Others, such as Dutch Foreign Minister Maxime Verhagen, have criticized UN bias against Israel.⁵⁹

LEGAL STANDARDS APPLICABLE TO ISRAELI COUNTER-MEASURES

It is difficult to evaluate legal objections to Israel’s actions since they are often made in conclusory fashion, without reference to legal doctrines or materials which support the charges, and are often raised out of context. Additionally, many of the legal criticisms are implicitly based upon misinterpretations of the relevant international law, but without explicit assertions of the proposed legal doctrine. Moreover, many of the charges are disingenuously based upon misstatements of fact or misuse of legal terminology.

Nonetheless, this essay attempts to construct a rational legal basis for criticisms of Israeli behavior and to evaluate these criticisms. It examines, in turn, the four distinct bodies of law that could potentially affect the legality of Israeli counter-strikes:

- » the laws of initiating hostilities (*jus ad bellum*);
- » international humanitarian law, which governs the conduct of military actions;
- » the laws of occupied territory, which some have argued applies to Israeli actions against Gaza-based terrorists; and
- » human rights laws.



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A careful examination of the relevant law demonstrates that Israeli counter-strikes to date, and potential future counter-strikes (both economic and military), conform to the requirements of international law.

The Legality of Israeli Military Actions under *Jus ad Bellum*

The law of *jus ad bellum*, as codified by the UN Charter, bars the use of military force against other states under most circumstances.⁶⁰ Article 51 of the Charter recognizes the inherent right to self-defense, notwithstanding the general ban on the use of force.⁶¹

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Jus ad bellum does not restrict the use of force in non-international conflicts.⁶² The uncertain legal status of the Gaza Strip⁶³ makes it difficult to determine the basis on which Israel's actions should be analyzed. However, it is certain that Israel has the right to use force in defending itself against Palestinian attacks from Gaza.

Let us suppose that Gaza is an independent sovereignty, and entitled to all the rights of states under *jus ad bellum*, including the general right to immunity from armed attacks from other states. In that case, Israel would be entitled to use force against Gaza by authority of the inherent right to self-defense referenced by Article 51 of the UN Charter. Gaza would have lost its general immunity from attack by repeatedly striking at its neighbor state and Israel's use of force would therefore be permissible on the grounds of self-defense.

Alternatively, if Gaza is not an independent sovereignty, it can claim no rights to immunity from attack under the law of *jus ad bellum*. Israel would not need (though it may be able)⁶⁴ to invoke the right of self-defense.

The Legality of Israeli Military Actions under International Humanitarian Law

International humanitarian law regulates the use of force once military action is under way, irrespective of its legality under *jus ad bellum*. The two most basic principles of international humanitarian law are the rules of distinction and proportionality:⁶⁵ Israel's counter-strikes have abided by both.

1. Distinction and Proportionality

The rule of distinction, as noted previously, requires aiming attacks only at legitimate (e.g., military and support) targets. The rule of distinction includes elements of intent and expected result: so long as one aims at legitimate targets, the rule of distinction permits the attack, even if the attack is expected to cause collateral damage to civilians and even if, in retrospect, the attack was a mistake based on faulty intelligence.⁶⁶

Israel has aimed its strikes at locations from which rockets have been fired,⁶⁷ at Palestinian combatants bearing weapons and transporting arms,⁶⁸ Palestinian terrorist commanders,⁶⁹ and support and command and control centers.⁷⁰ Locations such as Interior Ministry buildings, from which Hamas directs some military activities,⁷¹ clearly make a contribution to Hamas' military actions; they are therefore legitimate targets, even though they also have civilian functions.

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The rule of proportionality operates in conjunction with the rule of distinction to limit collateral damage. While most kinds of collateral damage to civilian and other protected targets are permitted according to the rule of distinction, the rule of proportionality forbids collateral damage that is expected to be excessive in relation to the military need.⁷² Prosecutions for war crimes on the basis of disproportionate collateral damage are rare, and it is difficult to see how a credible claim can be made that any of Israel's counter-strikes have created disproportionate collateral damage. Certainly, there is no record of any conviction of an attacker for excessive collateral damage in attacks like those



carried out by Israel. Moreover, as with distinction, the rule of proportionality relies upon intent.⁷³ If Israel plans a strike without expected excessive collateral damage, the rule of proportionality justifies it, even if, in retrospect, Israel erred in its damage estimates.

All reported Israeli strikes in the latest round of fighting have been aimed at legitimate targets and none has caused excessive collateral damage. Legal advisors attached to Israeli military units review proposed military actions.⁷⁴ They apply an extremely restrictive standard of both distinction and proportionality, in accordance with intrusive Israeli Supreme Court rulings that have imposed far stricter legal standards on the Israeli military than those found in international law.⁷⁵ It is thus likely that future Israeli measures will continue to abide by the rules of distinction and proportionality.

2. Perfidy and Civilian Shields

At the same time, it is clear that Palestinian actions in conducting military operations from within built-up civilian areas, thereby increasing Palestinian casualties, constitute war crimes. It is important to note that Israel is not required to refrain from attacking Palestinian combatants simply because they have chosen to hide behind civilians. As Article 28 of the Fourth Geneva Convention makes clear, the presence of civilians “may not be used to render certain points or areas immune from military operations.”⁷⁶ The article also makes Palestinian attempts to use civilian shields unlawful.

Additionally, the fact that Palestinian terrorists dress as civilians in carrying out attacks does not render them immune from attack – it simply makes them lawful targets that are also violating international law.

Additionally, the fact that Palestinian terrorists dress as civilians in carrying out attacks does not render them immune from attack – it simply makes them lawful targets that are also violating international law. International humanitarian law forbids perfidy, which, for example, means that it is forbidden to feign civilian status while actually being a combatant.⁷⁷ The fact that Palestinian terrorists often dress as and pretend to be civilians while carrying out attacks makes it highly likely that many innocent Palestinian civilians will be accidentally killed. However, the war crimes here are Palestinian, and not Israeli.

3. Retorsion and Collective Punishment

In addition to regulating directly the use of force with the rules of distinction and proportionality, international humanitarian law also provides important rules regarding military acts such as blockades and the imposition of punishment. Israel’s actions abide by these rules as well.



Israel's imposition of economic sanctions on the Gaza Strip, such as withholding fuel supplies and electricity, does not involve the use of military force and is therefore a perfectly legal means of responding to Palestinian attacks, despite the effects on innocent Palestinian civilians. The use of economic and other non-military sanctions as a means of disciplining other international actors for their misbehavior is a practice known as "retorsion."⁷⁸ It is generally acknowledged that any country may engage in retorsion.⁷⁹ Indeed, it is acknowledged that states may even go beyond retorsion to carry out non-belligerent reprisals, non-military acts that would otherwise be illegal (such as suspending flight agreements) as counter-measures.⁸⁰ Since Israel is under no legal obligation to engage in trade of fuel or anything else with the Gaza Strip, or to maintain open borders with the Gaza Strip, it may withhold commercial items and seal its borders at its discretion, even if intended as "punishment" for Palestinian terrorism.

While international law bars "collective punishment," none of Israel's combat actions and retorsions may be considered collective punishment.

While international law bars "collective punishment,"⁸¹ none of Israel's combat actions and retorsions may be considered collective punishment. The bar on collective punishment forbids the imposition of criminal-type penalties on individuals or groups on the basis of another's guilt, or the commission of acts that would otherwise violate the rules of distinction and/or proportionality.⁸² None of Israel's actions involve the imposition of criminal-type penalties or the violation of the rules of distinction and proportionality. It is striking that there has never been a prosecution for the war crime of collective punishment on the basis of economic sanctions. Indeed, many of the critics calling Israel's withdrawal of economic aid "collective punishment" call, or have called, for the imposition of economic sanctions or the withdrawal of economic aid against Israel and other countries⁸³ or, at least, claim to have "no position on [the legality of] punitive economic sanctions and boycotts."⁸⁴

Examples of retorsions are legion in international affairs. The U.S., for example, froze trade with Iran after the 1979 Revolution⁸⁵ and with Uganda in 1978 following accusations of genocide.⁸⁶ In 2000, fourteen European states suspended various diplomatic relations with Austria in protest of the participation of Jorg Haider in the government.⁸⁷ Numerous states suspended trade and diplomatic relations with South Africa as punishment for apartheid practices.⁸⁸ In none of these cases was the charge of "collective punishment" raised. "Punishing" a country with restrictions on international trade is not identical to carrying out "collective punishment" in the legal sense.

4. Closed Borders and Blockades

Israel is similarly accused of collective punishment for refusing to admit to the State of Israel persons from Gaza — both Palestinians and foreigners.⁸⁹ These criticisms have no basis in international law. There is no recorded case of any prosecution for the war crime of collective punishment on the basis of refusing a person entry into a country. Indeed, there is no general requirement anywhere in international law that a state admit foreigners into its borders. It is acknowledged that there are sources in international law that arguably require states to admit their own citizens.⁹⁰ However, Palestinian residents and other non-Israelis in Gaza are not Israeli citizens and have no right to enter the State of Israel.

Israel is similarly accused of collective punishment for refusing to admit to the State of Israel persons from Gaza — both Palestinians and foreigners. These criticisms have no basis in international law.

Israel's right to refuse entry to Palestinians and other foreigners is particularly obvious if Gaza is a separate sovereignty. No state need admit citizens of another state into its borders. But even if Gaza were considered sovereign Israeli territory, Israel would be able to control entry from Gaza into Israel proper. This issue is considered below in the examination of human rights law. Similarly, in the next section, we consider the potential rights of Gaza residents and foreigners under the law of occupation (if one maintains, implausibly, that Gazan territory is occupied by Israel); here, too, there is no source of any right to enter Israeli territory.

Israeli control of Gazan airspace and waters is also legal under international law. States generally have the right to claim sovereign control over their territorial air and coastal waters.⁹¹ For this reason, naval blockades — such as the one Egypt imposed on Israel in 1967, leading to the Six Day War⁹² — are considered to be affronts to the sovereignty of states and acts of war.⁹³ However, as previously argued, if Gaza is a separate sovereignty, it has attacked Israel, giving Israel the right to engage in acts of war as self-defense. This means that Israel has the right to blockade Gaza, so long as it abides by the general humanitarian rules of blockades, discussed below.

Moreover, the Oslo Accords — the 1990s interim peace agreements between the PLO and Israel — specify continued Israeli security control over Gazan airspace and coastal waters, granting the PLO only limited boating and fishing rights in Gazan territorial



waters.⁹⁴ Even if Gaza became an independent sovereign state, it is arguably still bound to its prior agreements with Israel respecting Israeli security control.

Israeli control of Gazan airspace and waters is also legal under international law.

Critics of Israel seeking to avoid these obvious legal conclusions are forced to adopt contradictory positions. Thus, for example, a group of pro-Palestinian activists calling themselves the “Free Gaza” movement organized the passage of boats to Gaza in opposition to Israeli security control, on the grounds that Gaza has a sovereign right to its territorial waters with which Israel cannot interfere.⁹⁵ In other words, the activists argued that since Gaza is an independent sovereign, they had the right to enter Gaza without asking permission from Israel. However, when one of the activists (Lauren Booth)⁹⁶ decided to exit Gaza by land, she found to her chagrin that neither Israel nor Egypt was prepared to open its borders for her. She then demanded entry to Israel on the grounds that international law guarantees her freedom of movement within a country to exit Gaza via Israeli territory.⁹⁷ In other words, for purposes of her sea passage, she argued that Gaza was an independent state; for purposes of her land passage, she argued that Gaza was nothing more than a part of Israel. Booth eventually exited Gaza through a border crossing with Egypt,⁹⁸ inadvertently underlining the vacuousness of her claim that Israel controls Gaza’s borders and that “[i]t could be days, weeks or years before I can leave, depending on the mood of the Israeli authorities.”⁹⁹

International humanitarian law does place additional duties on parties engaging in a boycott to permit transit of relief supplies. However, as will be seen below, these duties are very limited and Israel has abided by them.

The Legality of Israeli Military Actions under The Laws of Occupation

1. Is Gaza Occupied?

Some groups have claimed that the Gaza Strip is “occupied” by Israel according to the Fourth Geneva Convention, in which case Israel would be required to “ensure the food and medical supplies of the population” as well as “agree to relief schemes on behalf of the...population” and maintain “public health and hygiene.”¹⁰⁰

However, there is no legal basis for maintaining that Gaza is occupied territory. The Fourth Geneva Convention refers to territory as occupied where the territory is of another “High Contracting Party” (i.e., a state party to the convention) and the occupier “exercises the functions of government” in the occupied territory.¹⁰¹ Yet, the Gaza Strip is not territory of another state party to the convention — Egypt, which previously controlled Gaza, is a party to the convention, but Gaza was never Egyptian territory. And Israel does not



exercise the functions of government — or, indeed, any significant functions — in the territory. It is clear to all that the elected Hamas government is the *de facto* sovereign of the Gaza Strip and does not take direction from Israel, or any other state.

However, there is no legal basis for maintaining that Gaza is occupied territory.

Some have argued that states can be considered to be occupiers even of areas where they do not declare themselves in control, as long as the putative occupiers have effective control. For instance, in 2005, the International Court of Justice opined that Uganda could be considered the occupier of Congolese territory, over which it had “substituted [its] own authority for that of the Congolese Government,” even in the absence of a formal military administration.¹⁰² Some have argued that this shows that occupation may occur even in the absence of a full-scale military presence, thus claiming that this renders Israel an occupier under the Fourth Geneva Convention.¹⁰³ However, these claims are clearly without merit. First and foremost, Israel does not fulfill the conditions of being an occupier; in particular, Israel does not exercise the functions of government in Gaza, and it has not substituted its authority for the *de facto* Hamas government. Secondly, Israel cannot project effective control in Gaza. Indeed, Israelis and Palestinians well know that projecting such control would require an extensive military operation amounting to the armed conquest of Gaza.

Military superiority over a neighbor does not itself constitute occupation. If it did, the U.S. would have to be considered the occupier of Mexico and Canada, Egypt the occupier of Libya, Iran the occupier of Afghanistan, and Russia the occupier of Latvia.

Moreover, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that foes of Israel that claim that Israel has legal duties as the “occupier” of Gaza are insincere in their legal analysis. If Israel were indeed properly considered an occupier, under Article 43 of the regulations attached to the Fourth Hague Convention of 1907, Israel would be required to take “all the measures in [its] power to restore, and ensure, as far as possible, public order and safety.”¹⁰⁴ Thus, those who contend that Israel is in legal occupation of Gaza must also support and even demand Israeli military operations in order to disarm Palestinian terror groups and militias.

Additionally, claims of occupation necessarily rely upon a belief that the occupying power is not the true sovereign of the occupied territory. For that reason, those who claim that Israel occupies Gaza must believe that the border between Israel and Gaza is an international border between separate sovereignties. Yet, many of those claiming that Gaza is occupied, such as John Dugard and Richard Falk, simultaneously and inconsistently claim that Israel is legally obliged to open the borders between Israel and Gaza. No sovereign state is required to open its international borders.

2. Israeli Duties Regarding the Supply of Gaza

In any event, due to internal political considerations, as well as several rulings by the Israeli Supreme Court, Israel continues not only to maintain the flow of basic humanitarian supplies such as food, medicine, and water to the Palestinian population of Gaza, but in many cases to supply the items itself. In a recent case (*Albassiouni v. Prime Minister*, HCJ 9132/07), the Israeli Supreme Court implied that it interpreted domestic Israeli administrative law as requiring the Israeli government to maintain a minimum flow of Israeli-supplied necessary humanitarian goods when engaging in retaliatory acts such as cutting off the Israeli electricity supply to Gaza. Israel has not cut off 100 percent of the fuel previously delivered to Gaza, but, according to the Defense Ministry, curtailed it by approximately 13 percent.¹⁰⁵ Indeed, it is estimated that Israel still provides \$500 million worth of goods and services to the Gaza Strip each year.¹⁰⁶

Due to internal political considerations, as well as several rulings by the Israeli Supreme Court, Israel continues not only to maintain the flow of basic humanitarian supplies such as food, medicine, and water to the Palestinian population of Gaza, but in many cases to supply the items itself.

Aside from the laws of occupation, there may be duties to permit the passage of relief supplies to Gaza, but Israel abides by these duties as well, as will be demonstrated later in this section.

3. Article 23 of the Fourth Geneva Convention

Article 23 of the Fourth Geneva Convention requires parties to certain conflicts to permit transit to enemy civilian populations of a limited number of items and under a limited set of conditions.¹⁰⁷ However, the fighting in and around the Gaza Strip is not a conflict covered by the Fourth Geneva Convention: the conflict is not one between state parties to the Convention, and Gaza is not occupied territory.¹⁰⁸ Therefore, Israel is not bound by Article 23.

Even if it were bound by the Fourth Geneva Convention, Israel would be acting in full compliance with international law. Article 23 of the Fourth Geneva Convention permits states such as Israel to cut off fuel supplies and electricity to territories such as Gaza.



Article 23 only requires a party to permit passage of food, clothing and medicines intended for children under fifteen, expectant mothers and maternity cases.¹⁰⁹ Were Article 23 to apply, Israel would still be under no obligation to permit the passage of electricity, fuel or any items other than food, clothing or medicine. Moreover, under Article 23, Israel would be under no obligation to provide anything itself; Israel would only be required not to interfere with consignments of food and so forth sent by others for the benefit of children under age fifteen, mothers of newborns and pregnant women.¹¹⁰

Even if it were bound by the Fourth Geneva Convention, Israel would be acting in full compliance with international law.

Finally, under Article 23, a party can block passage even of food, clothing and medicine even for these population groups if it has serious grounds for suspecting that the items will be intercepted before reaching their destination or that the items may benefit the enemy's economy by substitution.¹¹¹ Israel has excellent grounds for fearing both of these results, especially after Hamas seized fourteen Red Crescent trucks carrying humanitarian aid on February 7, 2008, on the pretext that only Hamas may decide how to distribute aid in Gaza (Hamas redistributed the food products and medical supplies to Hamas-run ministries).¹¹²

Additionally, critics of Israel tend to ignore Hamas' continued mismanagement of the aid and fuel supplies that it does receive. Hamas misuses some of the fuel that Israel supplies to it. The fuel is not only used to power factories manufacturing projectiles,¹¹³ but is also used, for example, to illuminate the underground tunnels which are used to smuggle in weaponry from Egyptian Sinai. These misuses of Israeli-supplied fuel then target Israeli residential, commercial and industrial areas.¹¹⁴ The IDF even caught terrorists attempting to smuggle potassium nitrate — which is used to manufacture explosives and Qassam rockets — into Gaza in large sacks labeled as EU humanitarian aid: the sacks were branded "EEC 2 Sugar Exported From EU."¹¹⁵

Hamas has also attacked Israeli vehicles delivering aid even where it had no intent to divert the aid. On April 27, 2008, Hamas militiamen attacked aid trucks filled with fuel at the Nahal Oz crossing between Israel and Gaza, forcing the trucks to turn around.¹¹⁶ Furthermore, the *Jerusalem Post* reported eyewitnesses in Gaza who explained that, on at least four occasions, Hamas militiamen attacked and confiscated trucks loaded with fuel as they were on their way from the Nahal Oz crossing to Gaza City. The eyewitnesses added that the fuel supplies were taken to Hamas-controlled security installations throughout the city.¹¹⁷ Commenting on such attacks, Tony Blair, former British prime minister and current Quartet peace envoy, explained that "most people don't understand

– that we’re trying to urge Israel to get fuel into Gaza, and then the extremists come and kill the people bringing the fuel in. It’s a crazy situation.”¹¹⁸ Thus time and time again, the aid that Israel has allowed to enter Gaza fails to reach the intended recipients: Palestinian civilians in need.¹¹⁹

4. Article 70

Article 70 of the First Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 1977 creates a slightly broader duty regarding the provision of food, medical supplies, clothing, bedding, means of shelter and “other supplies essential to the survival of the civilian population.”¹²⁰ Israel, however, is not a party to the First Protocol and is therefore not bound by the provisions of Article 70.

Even if Israel were so bound, Article 70 does not list fuel and electricity as items for which passage must be permitted. Moreover, Article 70 does not place any duty on warring parties to supply the required items. It imposes a general duty on all states to organize “relief actions,” and on the warring parties not to interfere with the actions. Thus, under Article 70, Israel would have no obligation to provide fuel or electricity; indeed, it would not even have any particular duty to provide food and medicine. At most, Article 70 would require Israel to permit transit to others’ shipments of food and medicine, which Israel already does without reference to Article 70.

5. Customary Duties

More generally, the Israeli Justice Ministry has acknowledged a duty under customary international law not to interfere with the supply of basic humanitarian items such as food and medicine. The Israeli Supreme Court has also enforced this duty in several decisions (for instance, H CJ 9132/07, *Ahmed v. Prime Minister*, on January 30, 2008).

Israel is not required by its customary general humanitarian duties to provide required items itself, only not to interfere with their passage.

Regrettably, some Israelis have summarized this acknowledged duty expansively and inaccurately as requiring that Israel ensure a minimum necessary supply of food, fuel and electricity to prevent starvation or a humanitarian crisis.¹²¹ Even if the duty were as broad as this misstatement suggests, Israel has not breached its duty by cutting off Israeli fuel; Israel has only reduced supplies, while Gaza maintains more than sufficient supplies for basic humanitarian needs.

Israel is not required by its customary general humanitarian duties to provide required items itself, only not to interfere with their passage. Moreover, fuel and electricity are

almost certainly not items that Israel or other warring parties are required to supply. Additionally, Israel is not the sole available source of fuel and electricity to Gaza. Therefore, even if it were true that, as British Foreign Secretary David Miliband and Development Secretary Douglas Alexander stated, “without a steady supply of electricity hospitals cannot function, pumping stations and sewage systems fail, and access to clean water is denied,”¹²² Israel would not be required to permit passage of fuel and electricity. Moreover, given the likelihood of Hamas diversions of assistance, even the customary rule permits Israel to interfere with the passage of humanitarian items to ensure that they do not reach the wrong hands or benefit the armed efforts or the economy of the enemy.

Beyond these customary duties, one Israeli wrote that “the international community... regards Israel as continuing to have some responsibility for ensuring supplies to the civilian population” because Gaza “depends” on Israel for its electricity and water after local mismanagement of water supplies, several decades of Israeli military administration, Israeli control of Gazan airspace and continuing military clashes. However, there is no legal basis for the stated expectations of the “international community.”¹²³

None of the grounds referenced provide a legal basis for claiming that Israel must supply Gaza with electricity or the like:

- » Dependence on foreign supply — whether it be Gazan dependence on Israeli electricity, European dependence on Arab oil, or Somali dependence on foreign food aid — does not create a legal duty to continue the supply. Absent specific treaty requirements, countries may cut off oil sales to other states at any time;
- » Neither Israel nor any other country is required to supply goods in response to its foes’ resource mismanagement or lack of natural bounty;
- » There is no precedent or legal text that creates legal duties on the basis of a former military administration. For instance, as the above quoted Israeli wrote, no one has ever argued that Egypt has legal duties to supply goods to Gaza due to its former military occupation of the Gaza Strip;¹²⁴
- » Control of airspace does not create a legal duty to supply goods. For instance, UN Security Council-ordered no-fly zones in Iraq,¹²⁵ Libya¹²⁶ and Bosnia¹²⁷ were not seen as the source of any legal duty to supply those countries with electricity, water or other goods; and
- » Military clashes do not themselves create a legal duty to supply goods. Only occupation as described by the Fourth Geneva Convention requires an occupier to ensure the supply of certain goods. In cases of military clashes, the parties’ duty is limited to not interfering with the passage of certain humanitarian goods, as described above.

It is noteworthy that British Foreign Secretary Miliband and Development Secretary Alexander, while condemning a roughly contemporaneous Palestinian terrorist bombing in Dimona,¹²⁸ were not reported as having referred to the illegality of the Palestinian



attack under international law, nor, indeed, to have made any reference whatsoever to the continued illegal Palestinian rocket attacks on Israeli towns like Sderot. This is unfortunate, as the Dimona bombing and rocket attacks are clearly war crimes and illegal acts of terror under customary international law and international treaties such as the International Convention for the Suppression of Terrorist Bombings.

Even the customary rule permits Israel to interfere with the passage of humanitarian items to ensure that they do not reach the wrong hands or benefit the armed efforts or economy of the enemy.

6. Imminent Humanitarian Crisis

Just as the legal arguments of critics of Israel's economic policies towards Gaza are baseless, so too are their accompanying factual ones. For while the critics claim that Israeli policies are leading to calamitous results, the facts say otherwise.

Israel's critics have become increasingly vocal. Predictions of an "imminent humanitarian crisis" in Gaza have been made at least as far back as 1996.¹²⁹ In the year 2000, various NGOs turned up the heat on Israel by claiming the Jewish state was responsible for the "imminent humanitarian crisis/disaster" in the Gaza Strip.¹³⁰ Such terminology was mobilized anew in 2001,¹³¹ and since then annually in 2002,¹³² 2003,¹³³ 2004,¹³⁴ 2005,¹³⁵ 2006,¹³⁶ 2007¹³⁷ and 2008.¹³⁸ How has the Gaza Strip been "on the verge" of a humanitarian crisis for in excess of ten years?

Just as the legal arguments of critics of Israel's economic policies towards Gaza are baseless, so too are their accompanying factual ones.

It is interesting to compare the use of the terminology "humanitarian crisis" as applied to the Gaza Strip with other locations described in the same manner — post-cyclone Myanmar, for example. The cyclone was a true disaster which left "upwards of one million people...in need of shelter and life-saving assistance."¹³⁹ Another use of the terminology of "imminent humanitarian crisis/disaster" was Darfur, where 300,000 were murdered and 2.5 million people fled their homes.¹⁴⁰ Needless to say, any suffering in Gaza resulting from Israeli defensive measures pales in comparison.

Moreover, Israel has gone to extraordinary lengths to prevent the emergence of a humanitarian crisis in Gaza, having established the "Gaza Coordination and Liaison



Administration (CLA), where representatives of the IDF and government ministries work day and night to prevent a humanitarian crisis in Gaza.”¹⁴¹ CLA commander Col. Nir Press spoke candidly of Hamas’ “well-oiled media and propaganda machine which has succeeded in creating humanitarian ‘crises’ out of thin air.”¹⁴² He gave as an example Israel’s decision to suspend fuel supplies in early 2008 after a Palestinian attack on the Nahal Oz fuel depot.¹⁴³ Before restricting the supply, Israel filled all gas tanks in Gaza to their maximum. Yet, “taking advantage of this as a PR opportunity,” Hamas refused to draw on the fuel and “sent hundreds of people to gas stations in Gaza to stand with buckets in a long line, giving the impression that there was a fuel shortage in the Strip.”¹⁴⁴ The stunt was only called off after journalists “contacted Palestinian newspapers and Gaza-based industrialists to explain that the tankers were, in fact, full, but that Hamas was purposely not drawing the fuel. As a result, internal Palestinian pressure mounted, and Hamas had no choice but to distribute the fuel.”¹⁴⁵

The conflated message of the NGOs and the Hamas authorities in Gaza manipulates a difficult situation to reap political and financial gains. Some of the alarmism regarding the humanitarian crisis in Gaza can be attributed to the pecuniary interests of the various charities and political interest groups that have made Gaza their primary cause. Still, it is striking how, year after year, almost verbatim, donor states, NGOs and well-meaning individuals are persuaded to donate extraordinarily large sums to forestall an “imminent humanitarian crisis/disaster” that never actually materializes. In fact, “since 1993, Palestinians have received more than \$1.3 billion in U.S. economic assistance via USAID projects” alone.¹⁴⁶

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In fact, the Palestinians are the largest *per capita* recipients of foreign aid worldwide.¹⁴⁷ In addition, the Washington Institute for Near East Policy has pointed out that as of 2002, based upon contemporary prices, Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza have received “\$161 per person per year compared to \$68 per person annually under the four-year Marshall Plan, meaning the Palestinians have gotten more than twice as much



aid for twice as long as Europe received under the Marshall Plan.”¹⁴⁸ Commenting on the figures, Deputy Director for Research Patrick Clawson explains that “[t]he biggest single barrier to Palestinian growth is their violence against Israel, which forces Israel to impose closures and curfews.”¹⁴⁹ An old joke is that the definition of chutzpah is murdering one’s parents and then begging the court’s mercy on the grounds that the defendant is an orphan.¹⁵⁰ A new definition might be initiating a war while violating international humanitarian law and then claiming victimhood on the grounds of the suffering resulting from said war.

The “imminent humanitarian crisis/disaster” chorus is not only exaggerated, it is also completely wrong. In the words of the Israeli Foreign Ministry, the critics “should point their criticism toward the Hamas terrorist organization that controls the Gaza Strip.” A ministry spokesman also stated that “Israel allows shipments of food, medicine, fuel and electricity to Gaza because it doesn’t want a humanitarian crisis, but...there is ‘foolproof’ evidence that Hamas diverts supplies for ‘terrorist use.’” He continued, “[i]f only the Palestinians choose to cease their pointless and indiscriminate firing of rockets against hundreds of thousands of Israeli citizens, the entire region would return to normal.”¹⁵¹

The “imminent humanitarian crisis/disaster” chorus is not only exaggerated, it is also completely wrong.

In the wake of Israel’s withdrawal from Gaza in 2005, the Palestinian Authority rejected “the opportunity to consolidate real economic and political authority”¹⁵² and thereby to “stimulate progress towards peace in the region.”¹⁵³ Instead, it permitted armed gangs to destroy 200 dunams¹⁵⁴ of greenhouse space,¹⁵⁵ as well as computers and advanced irrigation systems that Israel left behind following its withdrawal. Palestinian militants firebombed churches, kidnapped journalists and even foreign aid workers. In October 2003 — prior to Israel’s departure from Gaza — terrorists ambushed and murdered three Americans who accompanied U.S. government officials who came to Gaza to interview applicants for the prestigious Fulbright student scholarship.¹⁵⁶ These violent activities culminated with the Hamas terrorists who took control over Gaza, throwing rival PA gunmen off rooftops to their deaths.¹⁵⁷

Two relatively unknown features of Gaza are worthy of mention in relation to the alleged perpetual “humanitarian crisis” that is supposedly about to erupt. First, Gaza’s offshore gas deposits (confirmed with British Gas) are worth an estimated \$2 billion¹⁵⁸ (even prior to the upsurge in the price of fossil fuels during the past years). If the Hamas government can stabilize the political situation long enough to install platforms to bring the gas to the surface, Hamas can reap the benefits of these offshore gas deposits. Secondly, the



population of Gaza is comparatively healthy and well educated. In fact, classic indicators of the standard of living place Gaza in a reasonably strong position. Life expectancy in the Gaza Strip is 72.34 years,¹⁵⁹ higher than Russia (65.94 years),¹⁶⁰ the Bahamas, (65.72 years),¹⁶¹ India (69.25 years),¹⁶² Ukraine (68.06 years)¹⁶³ and Glasgow East (in Scotland), where male life expectancy is 69.3 years.¹⁶⁴ Similarly, Gaza has a much lower infant mortality rate (21.35 deaths/1,000 live births)¹⁶⁵ than Angola (182.31 deaths/1,000 live births),¹⁶⁶ Iran (36.93 deaths/1,000 live births),¹⁶⁷ India (32.31 deaths/1,000 live births),¹⁶⁸ Egypt (28.36 deaths/ 1,000 live births)¹⁶⁹ and Brazil (26.67 deaths/1,000 live births).¹⁷⁰ Perhaps the most astonishing fact, in light of the sensationalist media coverage damning Gaza's chances for a better future, is that literacy in Gaza stands at a staggering 92.4 percent.¹⁷¹ This is far higher than India (47.8 percent),¹⁷² Egypt (59.4 percent)¹⁷³ and even wealthy Saudi Arabia (70.8 percent).¹⁷⁴

Likewise, contrary to common mythology that the Gaza Strip is “the most densely populated territory in the world,”¹⁷⁵ the Gaza Strip is unequivocally less densely populated than an array of other locales around the world, including a number of economic success stories. According to the *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2004-2005*, the population per square mile in the Gaza Strip was 8,666, while Monaco had a population density of 41,608 per square mile, Singapore, 17,751, Gibraltar, 11,990, Hong Kong, 17,833 and Macau had a population density nearly ten times that of the Gaza Strip (71,466) in 2003.¹⁷⁶

The Legality of Israeli Military Actions under International Human Rights Law

Under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Israel is required to ensure the protection of certain rights “within its territory,”¹⁷⁷ including the right to life.¹⁷⁸ The application of these rights to Gaza is far from clear. Israel does not exercise authority or control over Gaza. Thus, unless Gaza is part of the sovereign territory of Israel, it is impossible to argue that Gaza is Israeli “territory,” in which case the rights under the Covenant clearly do not apply.

Under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Israel is required to ensure the protection of certain rights “within its territory,” including the right to life. The application of these rights to Gaza is far from clear.

Moreover, even if Gaza is part of the sovereign territory of Israel and therefore subject to the Covenant, Israel has abided by its legal duties. For instance, Article 12 guarantees liberty of movement.¹⁷⁹ However, the same article also authorizes subjecting the liberty



of movement to restrictions “necessary to protect national security, public order, public health or morals or the rights and freedoms of others.” Thus, it is clear that Israel may block the travel of Gazans for security reasons.

More broadly, it has been recognized that the Covenant has little application in combat. Some argue that human rights law is displaced altogether by a situation of war.¹⁸⁰ Others claim that human rights law continues to apply, but admit that the meaning of such rights must be established by the rules of international humanitarian law.¹⁸¹ Either way, Israel is protecting the human rights of the Palestinian residents of the Gaza Strip by abiding by international humanitarian law.

Other Israeli Duties under International Law

Some provisions of international law impose upon Israel duties to act against Gaza and the Palestinian terrorists who are based there.

First, as noted above, Israel has the duty to act to prevent and punish Palestinian acts of genocide covered by the Genocide Convention.

Second, Israel has the duty, under Security Council Resolution 1373 (a Chapter VII resolution), to take various steps against Palestinian terrorists. Among the required steps “the Council decided that all states should prevent and suppress the financing of terrorism, as well as criminalize the wilful provision or collection of funds for such acts” and the freezing of funds and financial assets “of persons who commit, or attempt to commit, terrorist acts or participate in or facilitate the commission of terrorist acts.” Israel’s duties to prevent funding of terrorists are far-reaching. Under Resolution 1373, states must “refrain from providing any form of support, active or passive, to entities or persons involved in terrorist acts.” Thus, arguably, Israel is forbidden to supply aid to the Palestinian Authority, knowing that part of it will be diverted to Hamas and other terrorist groups and will, therefore, become passive support for persons involved in terrorist acts. Additionally, Israel is required by Resolution 1373 to “[p]revent the movement of terrorists or terrorist groups by effective border controls.” This means that Israel is arguably required to continue maintaining strict controls on the passage of persons from Gaza to Israel.¹⁸²

Israel has the duty, under Security Council Resolution 1373 (a Chapter VII resolution), to take various steps against Palestinian terrorists.



These duties do not fall solely upon Israel. Other states also are required to prevent and punish Palestinian acts of genocide, and, pursuant to Resolution 1373, to “cooperate, particularly through bilateral and multilateral arrangements and agreements, to prevent and suppress terrorist attacks and take action against perpetrators of such acts.”¹⁸³

CONCLUSION

The Palestinian-Israeli fighting in Gaza has been characterized by the extensive commission of war crimes, acts of terrorism and acts of genocide by Palestinian fighters. On the other hand, Israeli counter-measures have conformed with the requirements of international law, with the possible exception that Israel may be legally required to cut off aid to the Palestinians. Israel may continue to impose economic sanctions and engage in military strikes including a full-scale assault on the Gaza Strip, as long as it continues to abide by the basic humanitarian rules of distinction and proportionality.

Other states can, and must, do more to encourage compliance with international legal standards by fulfilling their own legal obligations, while refraining from raising specious charges against Israel. International law requires Israel and other states to take measures to bring Palestinian war criminals and terrorists to justice, to prevent and punish Palestinian genocidal efforts, and to block the funding of Palestinian terrorist groups and those complicit with them.

Notes

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- 3 Amos Harel, "Israel to Shut Gaza Border Crossings Following Qassam Strike," *Haaretz*, August 23, 2008, <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1015144.html>.
- 4 Yaakov Katz, "Palestinian Terrorists Bombard Ashkelon with Grad Rockets," *Jerusalem Post*, December 24, 2008, <http://imra.org.il/story.php3?id=41925>; "All Police HQs in Gaza Destroyed," *Jerusalem Post*, December 27, 2008, <http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1230111714969&pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull>.
- 5 *Telegraph*, March 3, 2008, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/1580480/UN-condemns-Israel's-deadly-attack-on-Gaza.html>.
- 6 "Middle East Peace Process Needs Changes on the Ground to Succeed – UN Envoy," UN News Centre, February 26, 2008, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=25767&Cr=palestin&Cr1>.
- 7 "Gaza Blockade: 'Collective Punishment' Condemned," Amnesty International, January 21, 2008, http://www.amnesty.org.uk/news_details.asp?NewsID=17616.
- 8 "Israel's Blockade Poses Immediate Threat to the Lives of Gaza's Sick and Elderly, Says Oxfam," Oxfam International, January 25, 2008, <http://www.oxfam.org/en/node/266>.
- 9 "The Hamas War Against Israel," Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, September 3, 2008, <http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Terrorism-+Obstacle+to+Peace/Palestinian+terror+since+2000/Missile+fire+from+Gaza+on+Israeli+civilian+targets+Aug+2007.htm>.
- 10 Over the past seven years hundreds of people were hurt and a number killed by Qassam rockets fired onto the western Negev town of Sderot and the city of Ashkelon, including Roni Yihye, 47, father of four and a student at Sapir College, killed on February 27, 2008, when a Qassam rocket exploded in a parking lot near the campus in Sderot. Thirty-five-year-old Shir-El Friedman was killed on May 21, 2007; Jacob Jacobov was killed on November 21, 2006, and Ohsri Oz was killed on the 27th of the same month. Nine-year-old Osher Twito lost his leg in an attack on February 10, 2008. See Mijal Grinberg and Avi Issacharoff, "Woman Killed, Two Wounded in Qassam Rocket Strike on Sderot," *Haaretz*, May 22, 2007, <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/861946.html>; Shelly Paz, "A Man of Courage," *Jerusalem Post*, May 28, 2007, <http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1178708695334&pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull>; "The Hamas War against Israel: A Diary - February 2008," Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, February 29, 2008, <http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Terrorism>.

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- 15 UN General Assembly, 62nd Session: The Situation in the Middle East — Question of Palestine: Identical letters dated 5 June 2008 from the Permanent Representative of Israel to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General and the President of the Security Council, A/62/857, June 6, 2008, <http://domino.un.org/unispal.nsf/9a798adbf322aff38525617b006d88d7/cc7a343163b0d0ad852573cc0051c9bc!OpenDocument>.
- 16 *Id.*
- 17 See Yoram Dinstein, *The Conduct of Hostilities Under the Law of International Armed Conflict*, 82 (2005).
- 18 *Id.* at 115. For ICRC's study of the rule of distinction, see Jean-Marie Henckaerts and Louise Dosward-Beck, *Customary International Humanitarian Law: Rules* (2005) [hereinafter ICRC Rules]. While it is not clear that there is a state of Palestine or that the Palestinian attacks may be attributed to state actors, the Palestinian attackers are still bound by international humanitarian law. It is generally acknowledged that non-state actors are bound by the rules of law such as distinction and proportionality. See Lisbeth Zegveld, *Accountability of Armed Opposition Groups in International Law* (2002).
- 19 See Dinstein, *supra* note 17, at 55. For a commonly cited version of this application of the rule of distinction, see Article 52(2) of Protocol I Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and Relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts.
- 20 Ian Black, " Defiant Hamas Leader Says Attacks on Israel Will Go on Despite Heavy Human Cost in Gaza," *The Guardian*, May 30, 2007, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2007/may/30/israel>.
- 21 Command responsibility extends to those who command subordinates committing crimes where the commander orders the war crimes, or has actual or constructive knowledge of the crimes and fails to intervene. See 1977 Geneva Protocol I Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and Relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts, June 8, 1977, Articles 86-87. In this case, superiors in the Hamas organization certainly have actual knowledge of the terrorist actions to be committed by subordinates, and even where they did not directly order the attacks, they failed to intervene.
- 22 Article 2(1)(b) of the Convention includes in the definition of terrorist acts those "intended to cause death or serious bodily injury to a civilian, or to any other person not taking an active part in the hostilities in a situation of armed conflict, when the purpose of such act, by its nature or context, is to intimidate a population."
- 23 Article 3 includes in the scope of the Convention all terrorist acts except those "where the offence is committed within a single State, the alleged offender is a national of that State and is present in the territory of that State and no other State has a basis under Article 7, paragraph 1, or Article 7,

- paragraph 2, to exercise jurisdiction.” Gazan terrorists should not be considered as being present or carrying out the offense solely within the territory of Israel, but even if one were to dispute this contention, Article 3 would still consider the acts as within the scope of the convention since Gazan Palestinians are not nationals of Israel.
- 24 Article 6, International Convention for the Suppression of Terrorist Bombings, December 15, 1997, S. Treaty Doc. No. 106-6, 37 I.L.M., 249.
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