

*Opinion*

**Friday night lights: Game time in Gaza**

**By Remi Kanazi**

Online Journal Contributing Writer

October 6, 2005—Israel, a member state of the United Nations since May 11, 1949, is not exempt from the rule of international law. On September 25, however, Israel invaded the Gaza Strip, and fired missiles at a vehicle carrying two purported “terrorists.” This aggressive and extrajudicial act is clearly against international law—i.e., the Geneva Convention (ratified by Israel in 1951), which characterizes willful killings as “grave breaches.”

Article 1 of the Principles on the Effective Prevention and Investigation of Extra-legal, Arbitrary and Summary Executions states,

Governments shall prohibit by law all extra-legal, arbitrary and summary executions and shall ensure that any such executions are recognized as offences under their criminal laws, and are punishable by appropriate penalties which take into account the seriousness of such offences. Exceptional circumstances including a state of war or threat of war, internal political instability or any other public emergency may not be invoked as a justification of such executions.

The unarmed “terrorists” in question posed no immediate threat to the state of Israel, yet Israeli forces have assassinated many such individuals in this type of scenario. This is tantamount to an illegal assassination of an unarmed Palestinian—a civilian.

Suppose one was to believe Israel in each instance in which it claims the “terrorists” were armed in ground combat. How can Israeli forces possibly know whether a militant is armed or not when firing three missiles from 300 yards away into the streets of Khan Yunis? They simply can’t—clearly disregarding the lives of civilians that are in close proximity to the “target.”

Shamefully, the American government applauds the pugnacity of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and his “iron fist against terrorism,” rather than condemning Sharon’s firework display to show his competitor, former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, that he can hang with the most savage of beasts.

On March 22, 2004, Hamas’ spiritual leader Sheikh Ahmed Yassin was assassinated when an Israeli helicopter gunship fired Hellfire missiles at his wheelchair. Yassin, a quadriplegic since the age of 12, and his two bodyguards were leaving a mosque after morning prayers when they were “liquidated.” Six other civilians were killed in the assassination plot and many were wounded, including Yassin’s two sons, who saw their father murdered in front of them. The only remnants left behind were Yassin’s charred wheelchair and the brown blanket that had once cloaked his shoulders.

Sheikh Yassin was an unarmed civilian, who was peacefully leaving a mosque, but Israel refuses to acknowledge the brutality of the matter. The extrajudicial killing of Yassin was a high profile case that garnered international attention.

The majority of Palestinian assassinations go unreported. According to MIFTAH, The Palestinian Initiative for the Promotion of Global Dialogue and Democracy, from September 2000 to June 3, 2003, Israel

extrajudicially assassinated 243 Palestinians. More than 100 of those killed were innocent bystanders and 31 were children.

Prominent Israelis have openly admitted to using this illegal policy, while some have gone further to include innocent bystanders. Amnesty International (AI) documented the comments of Israeli Air Force Commander Major General Dan Halutz on Army radio about the assassination of Hamas activist Salah Shehadeh, “we fired knowing his wife would be near him.” AI revealed additional statements Halutz made in a press briefing a year prior, “from time to time, non-combatants are hit in our raids. *This comes with the layout of the operations.* It is also sometimes the result of errors in our estimations despite the precision of our weapons.” In the last 18 months Israel has continued to violate international law and the Geneva Convention.

During the week long offensive, entitled Operation First Rain, Israeli Occupation Forces fired missiles into the Gaza Strip killing four Palestinians and wounding many more. The injured included 31 civilians, and infrastructure, including schools, bridges, roads and houses were targeted and destroyed. While Israel claims it “disengaged” from Gaza, Israeli security sources stated that Israel intends to, “take advantage of the momentum” and further attack Hamas. The new situation Israel refers to when firing missiles at Khan Yunis and Beit Hanoun is “post disengagement,” in other words reengagement.

In the beginning moments of the Israeli offensive, Hamas, in accordance to the Sharm Al-Sheikh cease-fire, vowed to stop launching attacks on Israel from the Gaza Strip. In a press conference Senior Hamas leader Mahmoud Al-Zahar stated, “Under our commitment to the national agreement, made in Cairo, to a cooling down period until the end of 2005, the movement announces it has stopped its operations from the Gaza Strip against the Zionist occupation.” The Sharon administration, however, isn’t looking for concessions or assimilation from Hamas, but rather its containment as a political entity.

### **Democracy Without Hamas?**

In the past, many believed the rise of a political Hamas would work in the favor of Israel. The perception: the radical Hamas would become the political mainstream for Palestinians, increasing the ease of Israeli attacks on the “belligerent” Palestinian population, while achieving the Israeli desire to further annex Palestinian land. Sharon’s administration quickly figured out that the integration of a political Hamas could lead to international legitimacy and force Israel to deal with an entity seeking far greater concessions than the Palestinian Authority’s ruling Fatah party. The Israeli newspaper Haaretz reported,

“according to political sources the fight against Hamas’ participation in the elections now tops Israel’s agenda in its international relations. The Foreign Ministry has reportedly instructed all its representatives abroad to make it clear to foreign governments that Jerusalem is opposed to Hamas’ playing a part in the Palestinian political process.”

These moves, however, fly in the face of the democratic process and the will of the Palestinian people to elect their own government. The remarks made by Sharon contradict his claim that Israel is “not getting involved in Palestinian politics.” Israel defines itself as a “democracy,” and further asserts that the state promotes democracy regionally—i.e., for the independence of Lebanon from Syrian occupation. Yet, one cannot support democracy only when it is convenient, and oppose it when hardship is imminent. Palestinian Journalist Khalid Amayreh, forthrightly declared, “If Israel is allowed to choose Palestinian candidates, then the American vision of democracy in the Arab and Muslim world would be called into question.”

After a week of Israeli bombardment and on the eve of [Rosh Hashanah](#), the Jewish New Year, Israel decided to halt air raids and extrajudicial executions in the Gaza Strip “until further notice.” Prime Minister Ariel Sharon’s office stated on Sunday, “We have decided to suspend the offensive operations that we launched last week in response to rocket fire from the Gaza Strip into southern Israel.” It is comforting to know that Israel can “turn off and on” the switch to terror when it deems appropriate.

The Palestinian people have undeservingly dealt with aerial assaults, assassinations, destruction of infrastructure, and economic instability due to whims of the Sharon administration, and its quest for "security." Yet, the Sharon administration doesn't seem apologetic for the loss of life and the oppression the Palestinian people faced due to the onslaught; hardly a justifiable or humane approach in dealing with an occupied people.

### **The Future of Gaza**

What will Palestinians have to build upon if they are subjected to worsening third world conditions? According to a B'Tselem report in March 2005, 77 percent of Gazans live below the poverty line (1,003,000 people), while 23 percent are in "deep poverty, meaning that they do not reach the subsistence poverty line even after receiving aid from international agencies." By the end of 2004 the unemployment rate reached 39.4 percent. The level of poverty and unemployment will continue to rise as the siege of Gaza intensifies.

The continuing brutality of the occupation pushes Palestinians away from peace, and reminds them of the seven years of failure that led to the second Intifada. While Israel forgoes its responsibility to take care of the Occupied Territories under international law, it cannot forgo the reality of the conflict. Hamas will continue to integrate into Palestinian politics, and assassinations and aggression against "targets" in Gaza will only infuse more hatred and tension.

For now, terror's light switch is turned off, but it is only a matter of time before Israel decides to turn it back on. Meanwhile, Palestinian life remains on edge and inconsistent. Those in Israel must come forward and denounce the decisions of Ariel Sharon, if not the switch to peace will remain off indefinitely.

*Remi Kanazi, a Palestinian-American, lives in New York City. He is a freelance writer, and the founder and primary writer for the political website, [Poetic Injustice](#). He can be reached at [remroum@gmail.com](mailto:remroum@gmail.com).*