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Gaza: Where International Law Has Gone Down in Flames

A War of Collective Punishment

by PHYLLIS BENNIS

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As Israel’s assault on the Gaza Strip rages on, ceasefires come and go. Most last just long enough for Palestinians to dig out the dead from beneath their collapsed houses, get the injured to overcrowded and under-resourced hospitals, and seek enough food and water to last through the next round of airstrikes.

“There is nothing left but stones,” Palestinian journalist Mohammed Omer quoted an old woman saying as she searched desperately through the rubble of what had been her home.

Casualties are soaring. By late July, Israel had killed more than 1,100 Palestinians — at least 73 percent of them civilians, including hundreds of children. Fifty-six Israelis, almost all of them soldiers, have died too.

A July 28 poll shows that 86.5 percent of Israelis oppose a ceasefire. Yet we continue to hear that Israelis want peace.

It's true that at least some of them do. An Israeli protest in Tel Aviv brought 5,000 people into the street. That's good — though a far cry from the 400,000 who poured into the streets to protest Israel's invasion of Lebanon back in 1982.

And when a young Palestinian teenager was kidnapped and tortured to death — burned alive — in Jerusalem after the bodies of the three kidnapped young Israeli settlers were found, many Israelis tried to distance themselves from the horrific crime. “In our society, the society of Israel, there is no place for such murderers,” Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu claimed.

But in fact, there *is* a place for those who call for murder — at the highest political and military levels of Israeli society.

Meet Ayelet Shaked, a member of the Knesset — Israel's parliament. She belongs to Israel Home, a far-right party in Netanyahu's governing coalition. She issued on Facebook what amounts to a call to commit genocide, by deliberately killing Palestinians, including women, children, and old people.

“The entire Palestinian people is the enemy,” Shaked posted. “In wars, the enemy is usually an entire people, including its elderly and its women, its cities and its villages, its property and its infrastructure.”

The Knesset member went on to say that the mothers of Palestinians killed should follow their dead sons to Hell: “They should go, as should the physical homes in which they raised the snakes. Otherwise, more little snakes will be raised there.”

Her language reminds me of a chapter in our own history — the genocidal Indian Wars. U.S. military leaders had called on their troops to wipe out all the Native American. Col. John Chivington was asked on the eve of the Sand Creek Massacre about killing Cheyenne children. “Kill and scalp all, big and little — nits make lice,” he replied.

Shaked's comments also echo the words of an Israeli colonel who testified under oath at the wrongful death trial of Rachel Corrie, a young U.S. peace activist killed by an Israeli soldier driving an armored bulldozer in Gaza. “In a war zone there are no civilians,” said the military officer — who was responsible for training Israeli soldiers to serve in the occupied territories.

There's no question that Hamas' primitive rockets violate international law. They can't be accurately aimed at military targets. But that doesn't justify Israel's violation of its own obligations under international law as the occupying power in Gaza.

Israel has the region's strongest military, the only nuclear weapons arsenal in the Middle East, and the unconditional backing of the United States. Its assault on Gaza violates the Geneva Conventions. Israel is imposing collective punishment against all Gazans, attacking hospitals, and using disproportionate force.

Israeli officials know full well that the best way to protect their citizens is to implement a real ceasefire — a breakthrough that would require opening Gaza's borders. Some of them also know the best way to keep their citizens safe long term is by ending the occupation altogether. Problem is, not enough of them will admit it.

U.S. taxpayers also have a stake in this conflict because Washington keeps sending Israel billions of our tax dollars and refuses to push Tel Aviv to stop violating international law.

For real peace, both of those things must change.