

Opinion Israel's Only Policy on Gaza Is to Beat the Drums of War

Israelis deserve a government that protects them. Instead it offers endless conflict, conscripts them, silences fallen soldiers' families, and deflects responsibility for thousands of Palestinian deaths.



Israeli soldiers from the Nahal Infantry Brigade wear night vision devices inside an underground tunnel in an urban warfare drill at an army base near Arad, southern Israel. February 8, 2017\ AMIR COHEN/ REUTERS

- Israel strikes Gaza as Palestinians fire mortar shells
- Gaza flare-up: Israel must admit the truth – Burning kites don't justify war
- Hamas has a strategy, Israel has only tactics

Following the killing of Givati soldier Aviv Levi last week, another fragile ceasefire has taken hold, potentially averting a war this summer. Prior to the ceasefire, the violence on the Israel-Gaza border had begun to take more familiar form, with Hamas launching rockets at Israel and Israel striking targets in Gaza, and the Israel Defense Forces was preparing for war.

The ceasefire, however, is clearly not a long-term solution.

Two potential deviations from a march to war have recently gained traction. The first is a 2011 Israeli initiative designed to alleviate the blockade of Gaza with an offshore seaport. The plan would help improve the plummeting Gaza economy while also helping ensure security for Israel. The seaport plan is contingent on Hamas releasing two captive Israelis, Avera Mengistu and Hisham al-Sayed, and the remains of Oron Shaul and Hadar Goldin, two IDF soldiers killed during the 2014 war.

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Another plan to ease the humanitarian crisis in Gaza is a solar energy field Israel would build, perhaps with Gulf funding, to supply Gaza with continuous electricity.

Let's be clear: These are both good ideas that should be pursued. Beyond these plans, however, Israel's government has thought up precious few solutions. It continues to treat Gaza as it has for the past 11 years, preferring to simply keep the IDF prepared for the next confrontation. IDF reserve units are now preparing for the next Gaza war as if it could happen this summer.

The question all Israelis should be asking is: Why are these solutions more practical now? What has changed about the situation in Gaza that wasn't true four or six years ago? The answer is that nothing much has changed, aside from Israel now tacitly acknowledging what those on the left have been saying for years: The blockade isn't working.

Instead of listening to those voices, however, the government was satisfied to allow the army to set Israel's policy toward Gaza. By yielding to the army the mandate to form solutions for Israel's Gaza problem, government ministers avoid accountability.



A picture taken on July 20, 2018 shows a fireball exploding in Gaza City during Israeli bombardment. Credit: AFP

Ultimately, this lack of accountability not only led to thousands of innocent Palestinians killed, but it has harmed Israeli soldiers, and by extension, Israeli society. IDF soldiers, conscripted to serve in the military at 18 years old, end up carrying out Israel's only Gaza policy while standing too low in the military hierarchy to change that policy.

As with the occupation of the West Bank, there is no alternative policy to the Gaza blockade. This is by design. Former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert initiated the blockade to strangle the Palestinians of Gaza until they voted out or overthrew their Hamas leaders and Netanyahu has been happy to inherit that passive strategy.

Every government since Olmert's, each more right-wing than the last, has used that as the foundation for its own policies, which can occasionally be even more

aggressive; MK Betzalel Smotrich from the Habayit Hayehudi party recently suggested Israel reinstate a military occupation of the Gaza Strip with boots on the ground. He also recommended building an Israeli settlement there.

In return for taking responsibility for the occupation and blockade, the Israeli government proactively absolves the army of wrongdoing while upholding it, socially if not legally. But social or legal impunity is not really protection, it's unhealthy denial.

The other side of this "protection" is that soldiers are expected to keep quiet about their experiences. It's not uncommon for soldiers from my army unit to react to my opposition to the occupation and blockade by suggesting that even harboring such a perspective is harmful to Israel. This social pressure to keep dissenting opinions to oneself prevents many soldiers from discussing the more difficult aspects of their military service.



Palestinian boys walk through the wreckage of a building that was damaged by Israeli air strikes in Gaza City on July 15, 2018 Credit: AFP

The denial of accountability, then, is a denial of justice – not only justice for Palestinians, for for IDF soldiers themselves.

When the result of soldiers' actions is the killing of innocent people, the psychological impact on them can be very difficult to overcome. If the result of their decisions is the death of their fellow soldiers, the impact is devastating.

One former soldier I spoke to recently was responsible for sending a team into a building in Gaza during the 2014 war, only to be ambushed by Hamas fighters. All the soldiers he sent in were killed. Today he struggles with alcohol and drug abuse, and he continuously relives his experience.

Making matters worse, even soldiers known to be suffering from mental health problems, such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, rarely receive the attention or help they require. This past December, when a friend from my reserve unit killed himself, his history of PTSD, which the army had known about, had been untreated since the 2012 Gaza war.

Meanwhile, organizations meant to strengthen veterans' voices receive public

support if they also defend Israel with publicity. Organizations that don't do publicity for the government receive only limited funding or nothing at all.

In 2015, one group of veterans had to publicly demand a minimum level of attention from the Ministry of Defense for treatment of veterans with PTSD. Breaking the Silence, an Israeli NGO that records soldiers' testimonies of human rights abuses in the occupied territories, fares far worse. Breaking the Silence is frequently actively demonized by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government and government-supported groups, despite its members having once been celebrated as IDF combat soldiers.



Breaking the Silence activists protest against the occupation in Tel Aviv, in March 2016. Credit: Moti Milrod

The families of fallen soldiers are also silenced unless they toe the line of Israel's government. During a Knesset committee meeting for some of the families of soldiers killed during the 2014 Gaza War, some of the bereaved family members were yelled at by the politicians who were meant to be listening to them. The wife of my former battalion commander, who was killed in the 2014 war, took that opportunity to clarify that in addition to Hamas, she holds Netanyahu accountable for her husband's death. She has sustained ceaseless abuse from the prime minister's supporters ever since.

Conscripting citizens to the army and sending them to defend the occupation of the West Bank and blockade of Gaza forces societal acceptance of those institutions.

When critics of those institutions are smeared by the government and organizations supported by the government, the occupation and blockade become unquestionable aspects of Israeli security, and their consequences become inevitable: Instead of producing professional soldiers capable of clearly differentiating civilian from combatant, security from aggression, or lethal tactics from non-lethal ones, the lack of accountability produces occasional vigilantes like Elor Azaria, veterans who silently struggle with their experiences and more staff sergeants like Aviv Levi who die in vain protecting the government's mistakes.

Both Israelis and Palestinians deserve the possibility of freedom from occupation

and blockade. Israelis deserve a government that can offer them long-term, multi-faceted protection from their enemies. Instead, they were given one option: endless conflict, and the scapegoating their soldiers for wrongdoing in the fog of war.

Real solutions will be out of reach until governments are accountable to their people, instead of taking advantage of them.

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