

Rain of Fire:  
Light Weaponry in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

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On December 27, 2008, Israel launched an air assault on the Gaza strip following the expiration of a fragile six-month ceasefire. Israel followed with a brief ground invasion, stating self-defense as its justification. A presentation on the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) website rather eloquently frames the Israeli government's rationale with photos and anecdotes about civilian injuries from Hamas attacks, and then bluntly presents the reason for this gruesome slideshow: "The Hamas deliberately targets Israeli cities."<sup>1</sup> However, Israel has blocked all supply lines into the Gaza strip. Border guards search all incoming shipments, to assure goods coming in are restricted to basic food and medical supplies.<sup>2</sup> If no sophisticated military weaponry is allowed in, how can Hamas threaten Israeli cities?

The answer is light weaponry. As defined by the United Nations (UN) General Assembly, light weapons are "[...] weapons designed for use by two or three persons serving as a crew, although some may be carried and used by a single person. [...]"<sup>3</sup> Specifically, this means rockets and mortars, in contrast to heavy munitions which require vehicles (tanks, helicopters), or small arms, which are designed explicitly to be operated by one person (handguns, assault rifles). Light weaponry poses a substantive threat in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Israeli MFA claims that combined rocket and mortar attacks launched from Gaza into Israel totaled more than 3000 in 2008 alone. Despite this excessive number, the total number of fatalities

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<sup>1</sup> Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), "Israel's Operation against Hamas: Defeating Terror, Promoting Peace," Israeli MFA, <http://www.mfa.gov.il/NR/rdonlyres/9A3FCDDD-DC73-4081-BDF0-164F376943DB/0/presentation6b.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) World News, "What gets into the Gaza Strip," BBC, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/7918716.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7918716.stm).

<sup>3</sup> United Nations (UN) General Assembly, "Report of the Open-ended Working Group to Negotiate an International Instrument to Enable States to Identify and Trace, in a Timely and Reliable Manner, Illicit Small Arms and Light Weapons," UN General Assembly, <http://www.epl.org/library/strategic-plan-00.html>.

from all of these attacks is **four**. Since the first of these mortar strikes in 2001, the total number of deaths is 24, at least two of which were Palestinian<sup>4</sup> (An alternative casualty count turns up 28,<sup>5</sup> but despite the discrepancy, either number demonstrates an appreciably low death-to-rocket ratio). The threat to Israel is not so much a military challenge as a psychological one. Instead of targeting military establishments, these terrorist attacks are bound for southern Israeli cities. Even with their relative ineffectiveness in terms of fatalities, the rockets and mortars defy international convention on acceptable war-fighting (International Humanitarian Law as backed by numerous treaties and agreements including the fourth of the Geneva Accords) by explicitly targeting civilian establishments.<sup>6</sup>

Staring-down such bare-faced disregard for human rights, it is little surprise to me that Israel responded violently in December 2008. That said, I am not trying to justify Israel's brief incursion into Gaza. On the contrary, I think it is important to note that the death toll just from Israel's latest military activities within Gaza (1,417)<sup>7</sup> exceeds the number of deaths from *all* of the rockets, mortars, suicide bombs, and other violence (1,179) *intended* against Israelis since 2001. (Let me emphasize "intended" in order to point out that several of these deaths have

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<sup>4</sup> Israel Project, The, "List of Deaths Caused by Qassam Rockets and Mortar Fire," The Israel Project, <http://www.theisraelproject.org/site/c.hsJPK0PIjP/b.672631/apps/s/content.asp?ct=3887857>.

<sup>5</sup> BBC World News, "Q & A: Gaza Conflict," BBC, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/7818022.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7818022.stm).

<sup>6</sup> Human Rights Watch International, "Indiscriminate Fire," Human Rights Watch International, <http://www.hrw.org/en/node/10911/section/1>.

<sup>7</sup> Palestinian Center for Human Rights (PCRH) LTD, "Confirmed figures reveal the true extent of the destruction inflicted upon the Gaza Strip[...]," PCRH, <http://www.pchrgaza.org/files/PressR/English/2008/36-2009.html>.

been Palestinians.)<sup>8</sup> I can appreciate the Israeli government's posture that these rocket attacks from Gaza must end. However, Israel's continued occupation of Palestinian territories has blurred the conventional line between a "just war" and an un-just war, raising questions about the justifiability of Israel's behavior toward Gaza<sup>9</sup>. I cannot support the Israeli government's use of force.

Operation Cast Lead was highly controversial in that it targeted many civilian establishments, including homes, schools, businesses and mosques. The reason was that Hamas and other jihadist organizations have used such locations as centers for constructing Qassam rockets and launching both the home-made Qassam rockets and other foreign rockets and mortars. Israelis relied on photographic evidence of missiles launched from the middle of a city as evidence that Hamas was using the people of Gaza as human shields,<sup>10</sup> a major breach of the human rights of the citizens of Gaza. By locating the rocket factories and launch sites in the middle of urban areas, Hamas and the other jihadists presented the Israelis with a conundrum: respond by attacking the cities, destroying civilian property and lives (thereby committing the same crime as the terrorists they would be punishing) or weather the attacks. I believe the logical appeal against an armed excursion to Gaza was more compelling than the stated justification for it.

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<sup>8</sup> Israeli MFA, "Victims of Palestinian Violence and Terrorism since September 2000," MFA, <http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Terrorism-+Obstacle+to+Peace/Palestinian+terror+since+2000/Victims+of+Palestinian+Violence+and+Terrorism+sinc.htm>.

<sup>9</sup> Raymond Kuo, "Occupation and the Just War," *International Relations* 22 (2008): 299.

<sup>10</sup> Israeli MFA, "Defeating Terror,"

Many of the most damaging weapons Hamas and related groups launch are not native to Gaza. The Qassam rocket (in all three of its incarnations) is a home-made rocket with comparatively short range. Originally, it was little more than a metal pipe filled with fertilizer. As the years progressed and the jihadists came to appreciate the sense of terror these clumsy weapons could engender, they made improvements. The Qassam 2 rocket was nearly double the size of the original, providing twice the range and ten times the explosive-carrying capacity. The Qassam 3 again increased the size (albeit much more conservatively), doubling the explosive payload and maximizing the range. Even with these advances in design, the Qassam rockets are starkly limited in their capabilities in comparison to other weapons in Hamas' arsenal. "Grad" rockets, originally Soviet designs now copied by dozens of countries, can cover twice the range of the Qassam 3s. The Grads launched against Israel from Gaza are generally believed to have originated in Iran. A third rocket type appeared in the immediate aftermath of Israel's initial strike against Hamas at the end of 2008. The WS-1E is a Chinese-made missile with a range doubling that of the Grad, potentially placing as much as 15% of Israel's population at risk of a rocket attack originating in Gaza. The current belief is that a sympathetic Islamic nation, possibly Iran or Sudan<sup>11</sup> is supplying Hamas with both Grads and now WS-1Es.<sup>12</sup>

Whether China or Iran has any hand in the supply of weapons to Gaza is less consequential than the fact that *someone* does. Without adequate resources to construct the more complex projectiles now coming out of Gaza, Hamas must have found a method of

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<sup>11</sup> Amnesty International, "Fueling Conflict: Foreign Arms Supplies to Israel/Gaza," Amnesty International, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/MDE15/012/2009/en/5be86fc2-994e-4eeb-a6e8-3ddf68c28b31/mde150122009en.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Global Security.org, "HAMAS Rockets," Global Security.org, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/para/hamas-qassam.html>.

subverting the Gaza Strip's border restrictions. A complex of tunnels running between Gaza and Egypt enables the transportation of more powerful foreign light weapons (like the Grads and WS-1Es) to Gaza. Additionally, potential supply routes run through sea transports as well.<sup>13</sup> An Israeli senior intelligence official has stated that Operation Cast Lead has not stopped the flow of arms into Gaza.<sup>14</sup> Interrupting these trade routes could potentially reduce the risk posed by Hamas, a risk which I believe has not been dealt a blow sufficient enough to justify the collateral damage of Operation Cast Lead.

A number of journalists managed to get access to jihadist rocket manufacturing plants within Gaza during or following the Israeli Operation. One operative for Islamic Jihad claimed that his team could produce as many as 100 rockets in a single night, in an unassuming building the writer likened to a garden shed.<sup>15</sup> With such minimal resources required to produce Qassam rockets, it seems arrogant of the Israelis to believe that a superior military force can eliminate the threat by bombing all known manufacturing sites. If any site as ill-equipped as a garage can host the production of Qassam rockets, Israel would have to bomb every square inch of Gaza to eliminate them all, a human-rights offense tantamount to genocide against Palestinians.

Most non-government organizations which actively oppose the trade in small arms propose a unified, international push for a single treaty banning the trade of small arms. Eric

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<sup>13</sup> Dan Williams and Nidal al-Mughrabi, "Sea, not Egypt, top Gaza arms route," Reuters, <http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/L19592955.htm>

<sup>14</sup> BBC News, "'No halt' to Gaza arms smuggling," BBC News, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/7971512.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7971512.stm)

<sup>15</sup> Ulrike Putz, "GRAVEYARD SHIFT FOR ISLAMIC JIHAD: A Visit to a Gaza Rocket Factory," Spiegel Online, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,531578,00.html>.

Berman of *The World Today* likens the prospect to the successful 1997 treaty banning land mines.<sup>16</sup> Unlike the landmine treaty, however, I believe that such a treaty is too complex and contrary to the interests of the nations which must support it to pass into international law.

Hypothetically, if the United States were to push for a comprehensive small-arms trade ban, Russia and China would oppose the treaty in protection of the profitability of such trade. This would be an ideal opportunity (for China in particular, where civilian ownership of firearms is prohibited) to launch a smear campaign against the United States as hypocritical, at once arming any of its citizens under the second amendment and denying arms to foreign freedom fighters seeking to overthrow a repressive regime. But even this hypothetical situation is impossible. Opposing small arms trade would inflame the American domestic gun lobby (which profits substantially from foreign trade) into a massive backlash, translating into massive financial support for political candidates opposed to the treaty. The huge influx of campaign contributions subsequent win for the gun lobby would end with a Congress which would never ratify the treaty if it were ever drafted and signed. If not the second amendment activists, the pro-Israel lobby (or pro-Taiwan lobby, etc...) would surely step up to the plate to protect the international trade of defensive equipment. Whatever the cause, without the support of the United States, China, or Russia, the effort to build this treaty is dead in the water.

How then can the attacks on Israel be stopped? I believe that the responsibility belongs to Israel itself. Hamas and the other jihadist groups will continue to bring rockets into Gaza so long as they have open routes to do so. To interrupt this process, an aggressive multi-pronged approach must be taken: First, Mossad must quietly step-up efforts to work with the Egyptian

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<sup>16</sup> Eric Berman, "Arms Control," *TheWorldToday.org*, (2008): 17

military, intelligence, and police forces to shut down the tunnels connecting Gaza and Egypt. With no possible means to get a foreign rocket into Gaza, the jihadists will have to rely on the Qassam rockets (as opposed to the more dangerous foreign munitions) to continue their campaign. Seeing the danger zone recede from the bounds of the Grad and WS-1E rockets will provide a great relief to a large population of Israelis. Second, install a naval blockade to halt all water-borne transports to Gaza. Supply routes can be re-routed through the South of Israel. This would put responsibility on jihadists to protect the incoming aid of the Gaza citizens by **not** launching attacks. If the rockets continue, sensationalize a story about an interrupted supply line. It would potentially give the Gaza citizens a reason to hate Hamas, which certainly does not hurt Israeli interests. It is my belief that the only way to win against militant Islamism at large is to turn domestic opinions against it. While these recommendations are no cakewalk, they reflect my belief that the changes people must feel in order to make a difference come from practice, and not policy. (A view in which I am not alone.<sup>17</sup>)

Ending the use of foreign munitions against Israel is simple compared to ending the use of Qassam rockets. The Israeli government should agree with Hamas on terms for another ceasefire with a finite timeframe, and in that time support the reconstruction of the damaged areas in Gaza. Operation Cast Lead destroyed approximately \$2billion worth of property. Israel should send Israeli contractors to make the repairs at the Israeli government's expense. Have the contractors hire teams of unemployed Gaza citizens to perform the manual labor, thereby stimulating the woeful local economy and starting to suppress the excessive unemployment rate. Additionally, doing this would assure Israeli oversight of the building materials, which

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<sup>17</sup> Foreign Policy, "The Battle for Hearts and Minds," Foreign Policy 167 (2008): 20.

Israel currently will not allow into Gaza, citing concerns that the materials could be used to help rearm Hamas.<sup>18</sup> I would not claim this reconstruction effort will make Israel popular in the area, but I am hopeful it will start the long process of making amends with the moderate Palestinians who are furious at Israel's offense.

In the end, I do not expect there is a solution which can isolate the problem of terrorism against Israel and solve it independently of the broader Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Only a stable and lasting peace agreement between Israel and Palestine will effectively end the rocket attacks on Israel, and that is a far more complex issue, demanding a far more complex answer<sup>19</sup>. An answer for which I maintain hope.

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<sup>18</sup> Haaretz.com, " Hamas says it reserves right to bring arms into Gaza," Reuters, <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1066603.html>

<sup>19</sup> Sapir Handelman, "Two Complementary Views of Peacemaking: The Palestinian-Israeli Case," *Middle East Policy* 15.3 (2008): 56

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