

Israel–Gaza conflict

We write as Jewish health professionals in South Africa in response to the debate on the war in Gaza.¹ Many of the letters have been critical, sometimes viciously so, of *The Lancet* for airing this debate, labelling it “inappropriate for a peer-reviewed medical journal to publish purely political, inaccurate, and prejudiced pieces”² and have gone on to equate the original call by Paola Manduca and colleagues¹ as “anti-Jewish bigotry, pure and simple”.² We disagree and are disturbed at the lack of insight of many of the criticisms that seem to focus on a narrow view of humanitarianism out of touch with current scientific and ethical thinking about the human rights obligations of health professionals. For example, the idea that “Medicine should not take sides”³ and that provision of medical care to Palestinian victims of the war represents a sufficiently ethical response⁴ is extremely problematic. Even more so is the argument that accuses those who speak out against the consequences of the war for civilians as inciting hate or introducing politics “where there is no place for it”.³

Remaining neutral in the face of injustice is the hallmark of a lack of ethical engagement typical of docile populations under fascism.⁵ More recent understandings of the role of humanitarianism in health (often involving noble and courageous actions) have highlighted the limitations of non-engagement as a moral choice and have argued that apolitical approaches that focus on emergency relief are wholly inadequate.^{6,7}

As South Africans who witnessed the worst excesses of state brutality under apartheid, we would have failed our professional duties had we not spoken up against ethical and human rights violations committed against civilians by an abusive state.

We most certainly did not have the opportunity to air such views in our country’s medical journal, which suppressed public statements by concerned health professionals and labelled such appeals for justice and human rights as “political”.⁸ In its 1997 investigation, the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission highlighted the abysmal ethical failings of the health professions in challenging apartheid medicine and the violations of human rights. History has proved us correct in our estimation that health workers should not stand by while injustice leads to the death and injury of civilians in a conflict that could be prevented.

We therefore wish to express our support for your decision to permit a discussion in the columns of *The Lancet* on the professional, ethical, and human rights implications of the current conflict in Gaza. We believe it entirely appropriate that health professionals speak out on matters that are core to our professional values and that *The Lancet* provides an independent and respected platform for such engagement. Thank you for allowing voices to be expressed that would otherwise be suppressed by prejudice, politics, and a partisan view of the ethical and human rights responsibilities of health professionals.

All the authors were harassed, victimised, or detained for being anti-apartheid activists. LL, DS, SF, SU, LB-R, and SG signed an open letter calling on South Africa to expel the Israeli ambassador during this current conflict.

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- 1 Manduca P, Chalmers I, Summerfield D, Gilbert M, Ang S. An open letter for the people in Gaza. *Lancet* 2014; **384**: 397–98.
- 2 Marmor BM, Spirt BA. Israel–Gaza conflict. *Lancet* 2014; **384**: 491.
- 3 Konikoff T, Konikoff FM, Shoenfeld Y. Israel–Gaza conflict. *Lancet* 2014; **384**: 491.
- 4 Leiba A, Pinkert M, Kreiss Y. Israel–Gaza conflict. *Lancet* 2014; **384**: 578.
- 5 Chung R. A theoretical framework for a comprehensive approach to medical humanitarianism. *Public Health Ethics* 2012; **5**: 49–55.
- 6 Arendt H. *Eichmann in Jerusalem: a report on the banality of evil*. New York: Penguin, 1977.
- 7 Farmer P. *Pathologies of power. Health, human rights, and the new war on the poor*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.
- 8 Medical Association of South Africa. Statements made in the USA by the President of the National Medical and Dental Association regarding the MASA and health services and conditions in the RSA. *S Afr Med J* 1987; suppl.

We, like you, are doctors and scientists who have devoted our lives to serving others, restoring health, and protecting the vulnerable. We are also informed, and also safeguard ethics in every sphere of our influence. Among us are those who have long collaborated in the advancement of medicine, science, and health with our colleagues, including those in Gaza. Many of us writing today are either members of Israeli academia, or formally or informally engaged with Israeli academia.

As ethical, apolitical, and professional members of the academic community, we find the open letter for the people in Gaza¹ an outrageous diatribe lacking context and a deliberate vilification of the sovereign state of Israel and, by extension, every Israeli. In publishing such invective, *The Lancet* has allowed itself to become a platform for distorted political activism, as has been previously noted by others.^{2,3} Because we are scientists and physicians who are accustomed to incorporating all data into the formation of educated opinions (even public commentary), we are obliged to redress the imbalance.

Although the letter implies that we are devoid of feeling, let us first assert that each of us shares the sorrow at the loss of human life in the present Israel– Hamas war in Gaza. Our loss is equal, whether lives lost are Israeli



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or Palestinian. For some of us, these losses are deeply personal, realised as direct bereavements; for others, this loss represents the loss of ideals, the interruption, and perhaps even the termination of long struggled for collaboration or the pain in realising a deep assault to our private ideals.

But the portrait the authors paint of wanton "Israeli aggression" by the mythically identified "largest and most sophisticated modern military machines" triggered by "perverse propaganda" fuelling "a ruthless assault of unlimited duration" is not only inaccurate, but outright histrionic, a dramatisation that can only serve unethical, non-scientific motives.

Exaggerations aside, we are further surprised to see the above assessments without any reference whatsoever to the well documented actions of Hamas, which speak to its militant intentions in no uncertain terms, realities that our colleagues obscure for reasons unknown. Allow us to rectify the deficit.

Since this particular conflict, Israel has been subject to thousands of rockets—at the time of writing, exceeding 2927 individual strikes—launched indiscriminately at its entire population, imperilling more than 7.9 million Israelis, among whom 19% are Muslim. Israelis as far away as 120 km north of Gaza have been targeted not with makeshift primitive weaponry but Syrian-made M-302 Khaibar missiles armed with 175 kg warheads that were first used in Haifa in the 2006 Israel–Lebanon war, courtesy of Hezbollah. Since Israel's independence, the Israeli aggression the authors so readily condemn is in fact the exercise of the right of a legitimate state to protect its citizens and residents—many of whom identify themselves as Palestinians—from assault, an assault that Hamas has demonstrated itself to be deeply committed to irrespective of the sequelae befalling either its targets or its own host community.

Absent also from mention is the extraordinary network of tunnels

Hamas has developed—presently numbered at 66 with more than 23 points of egress—from which attacks are launched and within which weapons are transported.⁴ These are concrete tunnels of remarkable sophistication, often electrified with illumination and telephone wires, and certainly constructed at the expense of the direct needs to repair the schools, homes, or hospitals of Gaza's citizens. Lest anyone be mistaken, these tunnels are not perverse propaganda as Manduca and colleagues would claim, but verified by international media, identified by neighbouring Egypt as a menace to security, and forming an established route for Islamist terrorism assaults in Egyptian Sinai.

Certainly, we agree that a blockade has been imposed upon Gaza since 2006, but it is important to record why. The blockade, deliberately described falsely by Manduca and colleagues as a siege,¹ is in response to the declared positions and explicit actions of Hamas, and positions and actions that Hamas refuses to relinquish because they are in line with their founding charter.

We accept that Manduca and colleagues, like us, aspire to regional peace. Hamas has no such aspirations. Seeing itself as the spearhead in the war against World Zionism—article 32 of Hamas' founding charter^{5,6}—Hamas expressly seeks the extinction of the Jewish state, the Jewish people, and also of the Muslims among us who would dare collaborate or engage with any Jewish entity. The Hamas charter expressly outlaws all Muslim actions to ease tensions, let alone make peace with Israel, condemning any efforts to work towards peaceful resolution of the conflict as violation of sharia law. Muslims refusing to desist from peaceful collaboration or interaction with Israeli people are accused of "Khiyana Uzma"—a great treason.⁵ This would encompass the Muslim coauthor of this document.

Although Hamas certainly marries Palestinian nationalism with Islamism and we agree that Palestinians, including those in Gaza, seek statehood, Hamas seeks to claim all land, Israel included, for Palestine. It is with these sentiments that Hamas has launched this war on Israel, commencing with an unending barrage of rockets and missiles, now engaging the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) in intense ground combat. Under assault in this theatre of war, the IDF established a sophisticated field hospital for the Palestinians of Gaza at one of the entry points into Gaza, equipped with delivery rooms, an outpatient clinic, and operating theatres—Hamas promptly banned Palestinians in Gaza from accessing it.

Hamas' actions are explicitly manifest with Islamist anti-semitism, which demands denial of the right of Jews to exist, let alone to a nationhood, and is an anti-semitism, political scientists agree, that is far more virulent than Nazi anti-semitism, which lacked the added and very compelling appeal of impostor religious legitimacy.

Embracing religionist war as a sacrament, Hamas has no dilemmas even as the Palestinians of Gaza bear extraordinary loss of life. Denying them access to the aforementioned field hospital underlines both Hamas' identification of Jews as the cosmic enemy and the source of all evil⁶ (article 22 of the Hamas charter) and that a wounded or martyred Palestinian has more value to the Hamas mission.

Islamist jihad has been central to Hamas' mission since its 1987 inception, a mission many liberal democracies are currently confronting. Although the post-9-11 era has escalated the Islamist assault on secular democracies, engaging the USA, UK, and western Europe in military confrontation with Islamist terrorism as well as many Muslim nations (some of which, such as Pakistan, are currently pursuing domestic military operations to

counter these attacks), Israel remains the only country denied the right to defend itself from Islamist assault.

Manduca and colleagues would do well to recall that Hamas explicitly rejects western intellectual ideas—citing them to be “an intellectual invasion”—and thereby rejects the humanist agenda of the 21st century, among which one of the pillars is the commitment to never again repeat the European Holocaust. In abandoning humanism, the gateway to genocidal thinking is once more flung open. Ironically, even though Hamas denies the Holocaust, it revels in describing Israel’s actions on Gaza (including in this theatre of war) as Nazi and themselves as the new Jews, a hypocrisy rarely exposed. Furthermore, Hamas has been, in this particular conflict, little short of masterful at engendering extraordinary displays of anti-semitism around the world in its support.

We unequivocally agree that children and women most often sustain the greatest losses, and in this conflict, the losses have been extremely high for the Gazans, but it still remains legitimate to identify the civilians in Gaza as captive to Hamas policy, a captivity that is imposed independently of physical and political barriers imposed by Israel and Egypt.

Under Hamas’ leadership in the past 8 years, religious and personal freedoms in Gaza continue to shrink, and the movement and activity of women is becoming increasingly confined.⁷ According to the International Religious Freedom Report for 2012⁷ published by the US Department of State, the de-facto Hamas authorities in Gaza have continued to restrict religious freedom in both law and practice.⁷ Children in Gaza, like those surrounded by other Islamist ideologies, are regularly recruited and enmeshed in the Hamas apparatus from the earliest years of their education. Congressional briefings, in which some of us have taken part, have documented the diversion of aid to service child radicalisation. Evidence

of radicalisation in the school curricula is widely available,⁸ as is the social value placed on jihadist martyrdom imposed on Palestinians in early life.⁹ All this is the work of Hamas, the political leadership that Manduca and colleagues claims seeks normality for its people while persistently ensuring quite the opposite. To claim that the Hamas leadership have moved to resolve their conflict with Israel “without arms and harm” via the short-lived Unity Government is extremely naive. While paying such lip-service, Hamas was in fact shoring up armaments, fortifying subterranean positions, and amassing militant operatives in the service of radical Islamist ideology, as the present conflict has revealed. Hamas’ commitment to subterranean networks above the sanctity of its people is self-evident and speaks louder than calculated diplomatic words.

Over and above all of these observations that were deliberately excluded, what shakes us to our core is the dehumanisation and bigotry exercised by Manduca and colleagues, who stand in accusation, claiming each Israeli Arab and Israeli Jew among us as bloody-handed genocidaires “complicit in the massacre and destruction of Gaza”.¹

Furthermore, we find the authors’ call for sanctions of the severest kind on Israel, a state that enshrines the religious, academic, and political freedoms of its citizens irrespective of faith, ethnicity, gender, or race, morally bankrupt. This, in the era of an unfolding Syrian genocide that has triggered nothing in the way of an international response, and 3.5 years later has yet to yield penalties for perpetrators of the 21st century’s most egregious warmongering to date. This is absolutely not to equate Israel with Syria, but to reveal the depth of prejudice in the sentiments levelled wholesale at an academic community to satisfy extreme bias. We fear *The Lancet* has crossed the line and lost credibility among its readership.

For *The Lancet* and its editors to avoid any further embarrassment in associating this prestigious journal with such a vituperative betrayal of its scientific mission, we recommend *The Lancet* retract the authors’ letter on the basis of favouritism for anti-Israeli political positions, the victimisation of Israeli academia, and the competing interests of a lead author known to be a political activist with anti-Israeli stances. At the very least, the letter, such as it is, should have been balanced by an article offering a rebuttal, or an editorial providing context, but should never have been allowed to be published in this fashion, which explicitly empowers polemicist politics above measured academic discourse. We believe it prudent for *The Lancet*, as a valued and still-respected academic authority, to reassess its practice of biased publishing in the service of polarising political interests of one group.

In closing, we note Manduca and colleagues’ “disgust” at the events in Gaza, the “wounds to the body and soul” of the Gazan people, and their “temptation to conclude” that, “with the exception of this 5%, the rest of the Israeli academics” bear responsibility for the death, displacement, and deliberate dismemberment of Palestinians in Gaza. We too wish to register our own feelings, reach the conclusions we are now tempted to make, and identify the wounds that have resulted.

We find abhorrent that academic authors would, without evidence or data, accuse an entire academic community of crimes against humanity by association of national identity or professional affiliation, an accusation that is not only a rank dehumanisation of an entire state, but explicitly seditious in propagating virulent anti-semitic sentiments to the detriment of whole academies. Although our feelings will undoubtedly recover, the authors, through their reckless words, have inflicted a deep wound to the body and soul of global

scientific and medical academia at the very moment opportunities for apolitical engagement, collaboration, and bridge-building are most needed. This is a victory only for Hamas, and a shameful one at that, emerging as it does from among our distinguished ranks.

We declare no competing interests.

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