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In 2004, the Israeli army began building a dummy Arab city in the Negev desert. It's the size of a real city, with streets (all of them given names), mosques, public buildings and cars. Built at a cost of \$45 million, this phantom city became a dummy Gaza in the winter of 2006, after Hizbullah fought Israel to a draw in the north, so that the IDF could prepare to fight a 'better war' against Hamas in the south.

When the Israeli Chief of General Staff Dan Halutz visited the site after the Lebanon war, he told the press that soldiers 'were preparing for the scenario that will unfold in the dense neighbourhood of Gaza City'. A week into the bombardment of Gaza, Ehud Barak attended a rehearsal for the ground war. Foreign television crews filmed him as he watched ground troops conquer the dummy city, storming the empty houses and no doubt killing the 'terrorists' hiding in them.

'Gaza is the problem,' Levy Eshkol, then prime minister of Israel, said in June 1967. 'I was there in 1956 and saw venomous snakes walking in the street. We should settle some of them in the Sinai, and hopefully the others will immigrate.' Eshkol was discussing the fate of the newly occupied territories: he and his cabinet wanted the Gaza Strip, but not the people living in it.

Israelis often refer to Gaza as 'Me'arat Nachashim', a snake pit. Before the first intifada, when the Strip provided Tel Aviv with people to wash their dishes and clean their streets, Gazans were depicted more humanely. The 'honeymoon' ended during their first intifada, after a series of incidents in which a few of these employees stabbed their employers. The religious fervour that was said to have inspired these isolated attacks generated a wave of Islamophobic feeling in Israel, which led to the first enclosure of Gaza and the construction of an electric fence around it. Even after the 1993 Oslo Accords, Gaza remained sealed off from Israel, and was used merely as a pool of cheap labour; throughout the 1990s, 'peace' for Gaza meant its

Israel's Message

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gradual transformation into a ghetto.

In 2000, Doron Almog, then the chief of the southern command, began policing the boundaries of Gaza: 'We established observation points equipped with the best technology and our troops were allowed to fire at anyone reaching the fence at a distance of six kilometres,' he boasted, suggesting that a similar policy be adopted for the West Bank. In the last two years alone, a hundred Palestinians have been killed by soldiers merely for getting too close to the fences. From 2000 until the current war broke out, Israeli forces killed three thousand Palestinians (634 children among them) in Gaza.

Between 1967 and 2005, Gaza's land and water were plundered by Jewish settlers in Gush Katif at the expense of the local population. The price of peace and security for the Palestinians there was to give themselves up to imprisonment and colonisation. Since 2000, Gazans have chosen instead to resist in greater numbers and with greater force. It was not the kind of resistance the West approves of: it was Islamic and military. Its hallmark was the use of primitive Qassam rockets, which at first were fired mainly at the settlers in Katif. The presence of the settlers, however, made it hard for the Israeli army to retaliate with the brutality it uses against purely Palestinian targets. So the settlers were removed, not as part of a unilateral peace process as many argued at the time (to the point of suggesting that Ariel Sharon be awarded the Nobel peace prize), but rather to facilitate any subsequent military action against the Gaza Strip and to consolidate control of the West Bank.

After the disengagement from Gaza, Hamas took over, first in democratic elections, then in a pre-emptive coup staged to avert an American-backed takeover by Fatah. Meanwhile, Israeli border guards continued to kill anyone who came too close, and an economic blockade was imposed on the Strip. Hamas retaliated by firing missiles at Sderot, giving Israel a pretext to use its air force, artillery and gunships. Israel claimed to be shooting at 'the launching areas of the missiles', but in practice this meant anywhere and everywhere in Gaza. The casualties were high: in 2007 alone three hundred people were killed in Gaza, dozens of them children.

Israel justifies its conduct in Gaza as a part of the fight against terrorism, although it has itself violated every international law of war. Palestinians, it seems, can have no place inside historical Palestine unless they are willing to live without basic civil and human rights. They can be either second-class citizens inside the state of Israel, or inmates in the mega-prisons of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. If they resist they are likely to be imprisoned without trial, or killed. This is Israel's message.

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Resistance in Palestine has always been based in villages and towns; where else could it come from? That is why Palestinian cities, towns and villages, dummy or real, have been depicted ever since the 1936 Arab revolt as 'enemy bases' in military plans and orders. Any retaliation or punitive action is bound to target civilians, among whom there may be a handful of people who are involved in active resistance against Israel. Haifa was treated as an enemy base in 1948, as was Jenin in 2002; now Beit Hanoun, Rafah and Gaza are regarded that way. When you have the firepower, and no moral inhibitions against massacring civilians, you get the situation we are now witnessing in Gaza.

But it is not only in military discourse that Palestinians are dehumanised. A similar process is at work in Jewish civil society in Israel, and it explains the massive support there for the carnage in Gaza. Palestinians have been so dehumanised by Israeli Jews – whether politicians, soldiers or ordinary citizens – that killing them comes naturally, as did expelling them in 1948, or imprisoning them in the Occupied Territories. The current Western response indicates that its political leaders fail to see the direct connection between the Zionist dehumanisation of the Palestinians and Israel's barbarous policies in Gaza. There is a grave danger that, at the conclusion of 'Operation Cast Lead', Gaza itself will resemble the ghost town in the Negev.

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