

## Gaza has been hit hard, but has it made any difference?

I knew Gaza well before the attacks, so on the day the ceasefire was announced, I was able to see for myself, writes Tim Butcher

Tim Butcher

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After passing by Gaza in the autumn of 1967, Graham Greene famously described being pinned down by Egyptian mortar fire among sand dunes near the Suez Canal. It was three months after the Six Day War had supposedly finished, leading Greene to dryly observe that perhaps the conflict had been misnamed.

A similar thought crossed my mind a day after Israel was supposed to have stopped its military assault on Gaza with a unilateral ceasefire. It did not seem quite the right term to describe the heavy Israeli naval artillery barrage that woke me at dawn in my unheated, partially-windowless, practically empty hotel, near the waterfront in Gaza City.



Easy target: small boys play on the ruins of a mosque in Jabalya in the northern Gaza Strip  
Photo: Reuters

But, while clashes have continued on the fringes of the territory, the truth is that peace is holding in the Gaza Strip after 22 days of heavy attacks by Israel. The tanks that ringed Gaza City have pulled back and the warplanes that pounded targets day and night have stopped attacking.

For many Gazans, these first days of quiet have been a time to come back into the light after weeks huddled in dingy shelters. They can walk streets that, until Sunday, were simply too dangerous to venture down. It is a time to take stock, assess battle damage and, in some cases, bury their dead.

The death toll is staggering, but what many Gazans find most amazing is the ratio of Israeli war dead to Palestinian. For each of the 13 Israelis (three civilians and ten soldiers) who died during operation Cast Lead, more than a hundred Palestinians died.

"Is an Israeli life really worth a hundred of us?" asked a hawker called Mahmoud, next to a bombed mosque.

I knew Gaza well before the attacks, so when Israel ended its ban on foreign journalists reaching Gaza on the day the ceasefire was announced, I was able to see for myself.

One thing was clear. Gaza City 2009 is not Stalingrad 1944. There had been no carpet bombing of large areas, no firebombing of complete suburbs. Targets had been selected and then hit, often several times, but almost always with precision munitions. Buildings nearby had been damaged and there had been some clear mistakes, like the firebombing of the UN aid headquarters. But, in most the cases, I saw the primary target had borne the brunt.

You can argue about the merits of the targets. For me, it seemed clumsy to bomb the parliament building, a place that

supposedly symbolises the power of democracy, rather than the power of one particular party. And just across the road from Shifa, the biggest hospital in Gaza, a mosque had been "surgically" destroyed – even though Israeli military planners must have known the terror the attack would inflict on the patients nearby, and the collateral damage on the hospital infrastructure.

And I wondered what military threat was posed by the ministerial compound in Tel el Howa, home to tower blocks housing various government departments. The damage was breathtaking, with entire high-rises pancaked down to nothing.

On the rural fringes of Gaza City it was a different story. The Israeli ground forces had caused what in some places can be described as "ultra-cautious localised carnage". Paranoid about taking casualties, they sent in tanks and combat bulldozers, knocking aside whatever stood in their way – houses, farms, vehicles or property. It was a case of "shoot first, then shoot some more and maybe then ask questions". The loss of civilian life in places like Zeitoun, where at least 48 members of the Samouni family were killed, was horrendous.

But, for the most part, I was struck by how cosmetically unchanged Gaza appeared to be. It has been a tatty, poorly-maintained mess for decades and the presence of fresh bombsites on streets already lined with broken kerbstones and jerry-built buildings did not make any great difference. And the same can be said for the mindset of many of Gaza's 1.5 million residents. Outsiders might have expected some sort of collective anger at the loss of life, or mass outrage at the Hamas authorities whose policy of firing rockets against Israel had brought down the wrath of the Israeli armed forces.

But I found that, so steeped is the Gazan mindset in the narrative of victimhood, there was no internally-focused groundswell of anger at what had happened. Palestinians in Gaza have felt victims since 1948, when a small number of locals were suddenly swamped by a larger number of refugees, forced to flee land taken by Israel at the creation of the Jewish State. For 60 years they have dwelled on victimhood, a supplicant people grown dependent on foreign aid and reliant on the role Israel plays as the scapegoat for all ills.

The sad truth appeared to me that operation Cast Lead, with its 1,300-plus Palestinian deaths, 6,000-plus lives ruined through injury, and billions of pounds worth of damage, was nothing more than another skirmish in a perpetual conflict, the same one Graham Greene witnessed 42 years ago.

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