



# Israel/Gaza

## Operation "Cast Lead": News control as military objective

**Palestinian journalists caught between Israeli firing and Hamas threats**

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## BACKGROUND

After six months of relative calm in Gaza, a ceasefire agreed between Israel and the Hamas movement ended on 19 December. The Ezzedin al-Qassam, armed wing of Hamas, then announced that the ceasefire would not be renewed, putting the blame for the break on the "Zionist enemy" which "*did not observe the conditions*" of the ceasefire, by maintaining its blockade of the Gaza Strip. The political-military movement that controls the Gaza Strip resumed firing rockets at targets in neighbouring Israel. Israeli aviation hit back against Gaza on 20 December 2008, firing three missiles close to the Jabaliya refugee camp. After this the rocket fire was stepped up, with around 200 being fired between 19 and 27 December, according to Agence France-Presse.

Following the death of an Israeli civilian, killed by a rocket fired at Netivot, Israel launched an air offensive it codenamed "Cast Lead" on 27 December 2008, before opening a ground operation from 3 January 2009. After 22 days of conflict, the Israeli security cabinet, on 17 January adopted a resolution in favour of a unilateral ceasefire in Gaza. The last Israeli soldiers withdrew from the Gaza Strip on 21 January 2009, the day after the inauguration of the new US president, Barack Obama.

According to the United Nations, the Israeli offensive left 1,330 dead (including 431 children and 112 women) and 5,380 wounded on the Palestinian side and 14 dead on the Israeli side (10 soldiers, of whom four were killed by "friendly fire" and four civilians). More than 4,000 homes were entirely destroyed in Israeli attacks and more than 17,000 others were damaged, according an estimate from the Palestinian Authority's central statistics bureau, which estimated the losses at more than two billion dollars.

News was also a casualty of the conflict. Six journalists were killed between 27 December 2008 and 17 January 2009, two while working, and at least three buildings housing media were hit. Foreign journalists were banned from entering the Gaza Strip throughout the conflict and they were forced to "cover" at a distance a war which attracted worldwide attention. The blockade prompted protests and indignation from the entire profession.

Israeli journalists have been banned, because of their nationality, from entering the territories for more than two years and the Gaza Strip is regularly closed to foreign journalists by the Israeli authorities. But this ban, from 27 December onwards, while the military offensive had just started, had serious consequences for the work of Palestinian journalists who were the only ones able to cover the conflict. "I wouldn't wish on anyone to live through what we lived through. Every evening, I asked myself how come I was still alive", Shohdi el-Kashef, head of the broadcast news agency *Ramattan*, in Gaza, told Reporters Without Borders.

Reporters Without Borders went to Israel, the Gaza Strip and the West Bank at the end of January to assess the extent of press freedom violations committed during the conflict.

## **THE GAZA STRIP CLOSED TO FOREIGN JOURNALISTS**

As Israeli aviation launched its offensive on 27 December 2008, the military authorities closed the Gaza Strip to foreign journalists.

During the second war in Lebanon, in July-August 2006, journalists had been "embedded" with Israeli troops so as to follow military operations, as reported by Nahum Barnea, of the daily *Yedioth Aharonoth*. And soldiers used their mobile phones to describe the war live to their families, but also to journalists, sometimes with film as well.

In Gaza, in December 2008, the Israeli military command, drawing lessons from the free media coverage that exposed its shortcomings to the whole world, adopted a completely different approach. They closed the Gaza Strip making it impossible for any foreign journalist to reach the field of battle. Once they entered the sector, Israeli soldiers were not allowed to take mobile phones with them.

The army not only designated Gaza as a "closed military zone" but they also added corridor of land 2 kilometres wide around the territory, into which only authorised persons could enter. A photographer from the *Reuters* news agency was arrested on 13 January for having "taken photos inside the closed zone", according to a military spokesman. His accreditation was suspended for two weeks and his cameras were confiscated.

According to the Government Press Office (GPO), between 800 and 1,000 foreign journalists have permanent accreditation to work in Israel, GPO head, Daniel Seaman, told Reporters Without Borders that 500 extra journalists had been accredited to cover the conflict as "visitors".

### **Who took the decision to close the Gaza Strip to foreign journalists?**

The various Israeli authorities put the responsibility on each other. Foreign ministry spokesman, Yigal Palmor, told Reporters Without Borders that his administration had nothing to do with the decision. But he stressed that restrictions put on journalists wanting to go to the Gaza Strip pre-dated the conflict.

The "National Information Directorate", set up in 2008 to deal with everything to do with government communications, was certainly consulted, but Yigal Palmor said the decision was taken at a yet higher level, between the Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, and Defence Minister, Ehud Barak. Nahum Barnea, editorialist on *Yedioth Aharonoth*, said that the two men did not agree: "If Barak leaned towards allowing the entry of foreign journalists, Olmert definitely vetoed it".

### **How did the press itself react?**

The Supreme Court on 31 December 2008, after proceedings were launched by the Foreign Press Association (FPA) grouping all foreign journalists in Israel and the Palestinian Territories, ordered the Israeli government to allow access to the Gaza Strip before 1st January 2009 at 10am, by pools of a maximum of 12 journalists. "Even though we do not in principle agree with 'pools', the Court gave us no choice, judging that it was 'pools' or nothing, the FPA's lawyer said in a press statement. The defence ministry reduced this number to eight and said two of them should be chosen by the army.

However, the Court's decision was never implemented. The army justified keeping Gaza closed for "security reasons" linked to the air attacks. After it launched the ground offensive, on 3 January, the army justified its decision by the fact that the presence of foreign journalists could obstruct the progress of military operations. The foreign journalists could reveal strategic positions and the ground operations could put the safety of journalists in the field at risk.

From the start of short "humanitarian truces" guaranteed by Israel on 7 January, foreign journalists asked to be allowed to enter the zone when crossing points were opened up to humanitarian aid, for two or three hours a day. The Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT), The Israeli defence ministry body in charge of coordinating issues relating to civilians, controls the crossing points, particularly that of Erez. Palmor told Reporters Without Borders that well before the military operations in Gaza, the opening hours of the crossing points had been reduced to guarantee the safety of personnel working there. The COGAT had therefore responded negatively to foreign press demands, using the argument of restrictions linked to the safety of personnel at the crossing points, refusing therefore to allow journalists to cross over during the hours set aside for aid organisations.

When on 9 January, it appeared there was stalemate; Reporters Without Borders launched an appeal urging the Israeli authorities to restore access to the Gaza Strip to foreign reporters, judging such a closure to be untenable and dangerous. The appeal was signed, within a few days, by 160 international media, including *CNN*, the *New York Times* and *Sky News*. The 160 signatures were on 22 January handed to the Israeli ambassador in France, Daniel Shek, by the secretary general of Reporters Without Borders, Jean-François Julliard.

Foreign and Israeli reporters were despite this forced to stay on the outside. "Journalists are asked to watch the war from far away, through a huge glass screen. We can guess at the destruction, but we do not know about the human stories behind it," said one *BBC* journalist. The town of Sderot, north of Gaza, was turned into a "giant journalistland", to quote the correspondent for *Le Monde*, Benjamin Barthe. The army set up a press centre for foreign journalists where the military could receive press representatives in any language, or almost, military spokesman, Major Avital Leibovich told Reporters Without Borders: "You just have to look at the schedule". While waiting, the army kept the journalists busy with a 'Gaza border tour', including visits to the Qassam museum".

Twice boats chartered by the non-governmental organisation "Free Gaza" (*Dignity* on 29 December 2008 and the *Spirit of Humanity* on 15 January) left Cyprus for Gaza, to try to break the blockade. On board were teams of doctors and journalists. But the Israeli Navy forcibly prevented them from getting close to the coast, not without causing damage.

A handful of Israeli and foreign journalists were from 7 January able to reach the theatre of operations, "embedded" with the Israeli army, the FPA taking charge of making a list of chosen journalists. In this way, a total of 16 foreign journalists were able to enter the Gaza Strip, according to Avital Leibovich. Mehdi Lebouachera, *AFP* correspondent for Jerusalem and Gaza, was allowed to cross at the Erez point on 13 January with several colleagues. He told Reporters Without Borders that the journalists had no freedom of movement. Certainly, they were in Gaza, but they could do nothing more than follow the army in its operations and interview an Israeli press officer.

From 15 January 2009, a large number of journalists entered the south of the Gaza Strip by the Rafah crossing, which is controlled by the Egyptian authorities.

The Israeli army announced on 22 January that it had decided to allow foreign journalists to enter Gaza via Erez from the following day. However, it only applied to the journalists regularly accredited by the Government Press Office.

Following a second appeal by the FPA, the Israeli Supreme Court on 25 January told the Israeli government that it should allow foreign correspondents access to the Gaza Strip, closure only being invoked in "circumstances of physical danger". The FPA welcomed this decision that "strengthens protection of press freedom and freedom of movement, as fundamental rights that cannot be restricted except in extreme circumstances", as the organisation's lawyer, Gilead Sher, put it.

**Account by Lorenzo Cremonesi, special correspondent for Italian daily *Corriere della Sera***

"On 16 January I was at Khan Yunis, in the Gaza Strip, which I had managed to get into five days earlier. At that time, Israeli military action was concentrated on Gaza City. I decided to go, with a translator and a young driver, towards Gaza City.

I therefore telephoned the *Press Office* in Jerusalem which advised me to speak to the Israeli Army spokesman. They told me that they could absolutely not guarantee my safety, since the zone I was going to cross was a war zone. They said however that they would inform army units there of my journey. They asked me what time I was leaving, what kind of car I was using and the number of people in the car. They added that it was pointless to mark the car with the word "media".

We left Khan Yunis at 3pm on the 16th, travelling on a totally empty road. When we reached the Netzarim crossing at 3.15pm, the road was blocked by a barricade made of stones and earth. I got out of the car to indicate our presence to an Israeli military unit, at about 70 metres from the barrier and to our right. I waved my arms and shouted in Hebrew and English that I was an Italian journalist. The soldiers opened fire with M16 and sub-machinegun fire for 15 minutes, hitting the car several times. Two bullets penetrated the car, the windows were broken as was the windscreen and bullets also hit the seats. We threw ourselves to the ground, hiding behind a sand bank and continued to shout. Machine-gun fire continued for about 40 minutes. I used my mobile phone to call the military spokesman to inform him of the situation. At about 4pm, the spokesman told me that the military unit had been informed of our identity and we could leave. But as soon as we got back into the vehicle, the soldiers opened fire again, aiming at our vehicle. We hit the ground again where we stayed, stretched out and hidden behind the dunes. The shooting continued but sporadically.

The spokesman called me again at 5pm, reassured me and we were able to escape. Nobody was wounded but the car was very badly damaged. I have often come under military fire, but it's the first time I have been confronted with an army whose rules of engagement allow it to fire continuously on civilians.

## **Why was the Gaza Strip closed to the press?**

Many reasons were given for banning foreign journalists from the Gaza Strip and they changed over time: security of personnel working at crossing points, personal security of journalists, the risk of obstructing military operations in the field and so on. Head of the GPO, Daniel Seaman, took a hard-line view and took full control over news. "We prevented journalists from entering to avoid having to deal with something like what happened in Kanaa<sup>1</sup>. And it worked. Public opinion was not able to influence the army in its choice of tactics." He added that, "Democracy does sometimes have to take certain measures". As far as he was concerned, he had no doubt that it was decided on military considerations alone.

The GPO director also stressed that in the past other governments had banned journalists from conflict zones, and that Israel was not the first country to adopt such restrictions. He cited the example of the Falklands War and the first Gulf war, during which respectively the British and the Americans imposed real control over news. He said, "It has happened in the past and it will happen again, particularly when we know the extent to which the media can constitute weapons of war".

But many people think that the Israeli army also wanted to control the images of this war, a control they did not exercise during the second war of Lebanon and which resulted at the time in a defeat in the media. Sakher M. Abu al-Oun, leader of the Gaza branch of the Palestinian journalists' union, told Reporters Without Borders that "the international media were not allowed to enter so that the international community did not know about the massacres committed by the Israeli Army."

## **And what was the role of Egypt in this?**

After Hamas took control of Gaza in June 2007, the Egyptian authorities decided to close the Rafah crossing between the two territories, a decision that sparked a furious reaction from the people of Gaza. Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak said during talks with a European delegation on an official visit to Cairo on 5 January 2009, that it was "preferable that Hamas did not come out as winner in this situation. Hamas must be defeated." The Egyptian president accuses Hamas of responsibility for this war, having broken the ceasefire. The grip of an Islamist movement on Gaza worries the Egyptian government which is already grappling with raised tensions in connection with the Muslim Brotherhood.

In an interview, with Reporters Without Borders, deputy information minister, Dr Abu Hasheish, declined to discuss Egypt's stance in connection with the closing of the Rafah crossing.

However, from 15 January onwards, numbers of foreign journalists did manage to reach Gaza from Egypt. But this situation only lasted a few days. The Egyptian authorities decided on 19 January to reserve the Rafah crossing for humanitarian aid (ambulances, doctors, nurses and rescue workers), as a foreign diplomat posted to Cairo explained it to Reporters Without Borders. Journalists then had to go further south to Kerem Shalom, jointly controlled by Egyptians and Israelis, to try to enter Gaza.

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<sup>1</sup> Israeli raid that left 40 dead (including 21 children) in southern Lebanon in 2006.

## **PALESTINIAN JOURNALISTS THE ONLY ONES ABLE TO WITNESS EVENTS IN GAZA**

Until foreign journalists managed to enter the Gaza Strip via Rafah around 15 January 2009, the only images broadcast by the world's media were the work of Palestinian journalists living permanently in the territory at war. These journalists continued to work, braving air raids and ground offensives, overcoming technical difficulties and while having to bear constant anxiety for the safety of their families.

The number of journalists killed or injured varies according to the sources. After investigating on the spot, Reporters Without Borders believes that six journalists were killed, two of them while working. During an interview with the Hamas deputy information minister, he put forward the figure of five journalists killed. Some 15 were wounded, according to Reporters Without Borders' figures.

### **Two journalists died in fighting, several media buildings hit by Israeli shooting**

Palestinian media suffered losses on the very first day of the offensive. However the Israeli authorities know the exact location of all the news agencies based in the Gaza Strip. And these agencies are in regular contact with the Arab-language section of the Israeli Army, one of the spokesmen being Afikhay Adrai.

Bassel Faraj, a 22-year-old cameraman, was very badly wounded on 27 December 2008 while covering the start of the Israeli offensive with a team from *Palestine Media Production* (PMP). Abdelghani Jaber, general director of this production house that provides footage for German television *ZDF* as well as Algerian and Moroccan television, told Reporters Without Borders that one of his crews, travelling in a vehicle clearly marked with a "TV" emblem in red letters, was close to the Association for aid to released prisoners when the building was hit by Israeli aviation. The journalists' car was struck by shell fragments and debris from the damaged building. The four passengers, Mohammed Madi, the producer, Mohammed al-Tanani, Khaled Abu Shamala and Bassel Faraj, were wounded. They were taken to Shifa hospital in Gaza City. Bassel Faraj, who had suffered a head wound, died on 6 January after being transferred to a hospital in Cairo.

On 28 December 2008, the premises of *al-Aqsa TV*, launched by Hamas in 2005, were bombarded for several hours at the start of the air raid, and three of the five floors were destroyed of this building, situated in the al-Nasr district of Gaza City. Director of programmes, Samir Abu Mohsen, told Reporters Without Borders that the channel's management had expected such an attack and had prepared an emergency evacuation plan. From the start of the air offensive, the channel had started broadcasting from an alternative studio so *al-Aqsa's* official studios were empty when the attack came.

Israeli Army spokesman, Avital Leibovich, told the organisation that the Israeli authorities viewed the media as a propaganda tool, a weapon being used by Hamas, and it should therefore be destroyed on the same basis as any other military target. In the same way, *al-Manar*, the television channel of the Lebanese Shiite Hezbollah movement, was the target of military attacks during the war in Lebanon in 2006. This position is shared by Daniel Seaman, director of the Government Press Office.

The line between a media used to support a war effort and a simple propaganda tool is difficult to draw, says Yigal Palmor. For Charles Enderlin, a member of the FPA committee and permanent correspondent for *France 2* television "Even if there

is no doubt that *al-Aqsa* is a militant, extremist, anti-Jewish television, it is not a reason to bomb it”.

Under international law, even a media serving as a propaganda tool at the service of the enemy, does not constitute a legitimate military target. It is protected on the same basis as any civilian building. The International Criminal Tribunal for the ex-Yugoslavia (ICTY) has said that a media should not be considered a military objective for the sole reason that it takes part in a propaganda effort in the support of troops. On the other hand, the same jurisdiction rules that a media that calls for murder and incites hatred, does become a legitimate target.

Deliberate attacks on buildings used by the press constitute a violation of international humanitarian law. Journalists have the right to do their job in territories at war. Nothing can therefore justify the fact of intentionally aiming at a building housing a media.

The case of the Hamas channel, *al-Aqsa*, is more complex. Many of its programmes are clearly anti-Semitic and call for Jihad. Some of its programmes for children praise martyrs and advocate resistance against the “Zionist enemy” through armed struggle.

For all that, international humanitarian law specifies that in such cases, there is an obligation to issue a warning and a principle of proportionality to be respected. Under Protocol 1 of the Geneva Conventions, those who prepare or decide on an attack should “refrain from deciding to launch any attack which may be expected to cause incidental loss of civilian life”. It adds: “effective advance warning shall be given of attacks which may affect the civilian population, unless circumstances do not permit”.

#### **Media targeted in wartime: Cases have multiplied since the war in Kosovo**

In the past, other media accused of being “propaganda media” have been targeted and constitute very dangerous precedents for the press. In Yugoslavia, The North Atlantic Alliance (NATO) bombed the headquarters of *RTS* radio and television in Belgrade, killing 16 of its employees. In January 2001, The Israeli Army dynamited the Palestinian television and radio *The Voice of Palestine* in the occupied territories in Ramallah. During the US campaign in Afghanistan, the army on 12 November 2001, bombed the offices of the Arabic TV *al-Jazeera* in Kabul.

Iraqi television was bombarded by the Anglo-American coalition on the evening of 25 March 2003. A few days later, a missile hit the information ministry.

Three journalists on Lebanese *New TV* were wounded in an Israeli Army air raid in July 2006. The following day, three staff on *al-Manar* television run by Lebanese Hezbollah, were wounded in an Israeli attack on the media’s offices, located in the Shiite southern suburbs of Beirut. The station put out a release saying that the missile had not destroyed its relay aerial and that broadcasts had continued without interruption.

The Israeli defence forces on 3 January 2009, bombarded the offices of the weekly *al-Rissala*, financed by Hamas. The attack took place at night and there were no staff casualties as a result, editor, Wissam 'Afifa, told Reporters Without Borders. During the same attack, the army also destroyed the offices of al-Rantissi Printers, the weekly’s printing house.



Alaa Murtaja, journalist and correspondent on radio *al-Buraq*, was killed when his house was hit in a bombardment, on 9 January, while he was reporting live on air from his home, in the al-Zeitoun district in the south of Gaza City. The journalist had decided to work at home, for security reasons.

The same day, the al-Jawhara Tower (on the corner of al-Wahda street and al-Jalaa street) was hit by firing from Israeli planes, said Atef Abu Rami, head of the *Palestine Media & Communications Co.* (PMCC), housed in the building, and which provides footage to 25 TV channels as well as to foreign news agencies. He told Reporters Without Borders that he had been in permanent contact with Israeli Army officials before and during the conflict. They had constantly reassured him that the offices would not be targeted by army shooting, and insisting on the need to keep the offices permanently lit. So on 9 January, the office's lights were all on, red TV stickers had been stuck on the windows and PRESS and TV signs were painted in red on the roof of the new eight-storey building, when at around 6pm, the tower was hit, while journalists were on the roof in the process of broadcasting live. Only Manar Shulail Shalloula, a 25-year-old producer on Saudi TV *al-Ekhbariya*, suffered a head injury. Atef Abu Rami was quick to stress that the journalists had only narrowly escaped death.

After he demanded an explanation, the Israeli Army replied that Hamas fighters had been occupying an office in the tower. Atef Abu Rami, however, had an alternative explanation. He said the Israelis had deliberately targeted the installations of Iranian Arabic-language television, *al-Alam*, which, three years earlier had wanted to take premises in the tower. But its entire equipment had been blocked at Ashdod, an Israeli port, north of Erez, preventing it from broadcasting from Gaza. The aerial which was fixed on the roof of the building and could therefore have been targeted in the shooting, was not in service.

After investigating, Israeli military officials, on the other hand, told Reporters Without Borders that they did not know about any attack on this building.

On 15 January, around midday, the south side of the al-Shuruq tower, housing several news agencies, was hit in Israeli shelling while the Israeli Army was engaged in combat in the Tal al-Hawwa district in the south of Gaza City.

The studios of the agency *Gaza Media Center* took a direct hit and two journalists were injured. The agency sells footage to *Abu Dhabi TV*, *Fox News*, *Sky News*, *CNN* and *France 2* among others. Ayman Youssef Al-Rouzi was hit in the head by shell fragments while Mohammed al-Soussi had an arm injury. He said afterwards that he probably would not be alive today except for the fact that, for once, he was wearing a bullet-proof vest on that day.

Palestinian journalists have wondered about the reasons for the shooting. Mohammed al-Soussi said that from 8pm that day the channel had put cameras on the roof to film the fighting in the district. Others point out that the building had a Hamas radio, *al-Aqsa Radio*, on the 15<sup>th</sup> floor. Dr Abu Hasheish, deputy information minister in the Hamas government, said there was no doubt about the explanation: The attacks were "intentional" and were aimed at "preventing the media from covering the Israeli Army massacre of Palestinian civilians". This view is shared by the majority of Palestinian journalists whom Reporters Without Borders met in Gaza.

## **Why did the Israeli Army fire on buildings housing media?**

Questioned by the organisation about the attack on al-Shuruq, Major Avital Leibovich explained that the Israeli Army was carrying out an investigation into the circumstances of the hit. Early conclusions suggested it might have been a mistake. They army, had on that day, fired several "smoke bombs" to facilitate the military operation aimed at killing Mahmoud al-Zahar, one of Hamas's senior leaders, who was present in the district. For the Israeli defence forces, it was therefore "an unfortunate firing error" and not an act aimed deliberately at the press. The officer phoned the US channel, *Fox*, which buys footage from the *Gaza Media Center*, to give it the first results of the investigation.

Throughout the conflict, Israel continued to justify its military attacks by accusing Hamas of making use of civilian bases to fire its rockets, including buildings housing the media. From 20 January, the Israeli authorities regularly broadcast a video showing Hanan el-Masri, a journalist from *al-Arabiya*, filmed on 15 January, shortly before going on air live. In this video, she is seen and heard saying on the telephone that missiles had been fired from lower floors of the al-Shuruq building where the channel was based. Questioned in Gaza by Reporters Without Borders, the journalist said that this passage had been recorded a few seconds before her live broadcast. The absence of the *al-Arabiya* logo on the tape showed, she said, that the Israeli services had hacked into it between the Gaza station and the television studios based in the United Arab Emirates. She pointed out that "this constitutes a violation of international law" and said the channel was planning to lay a complaint against Israel. She added that she had only asked a question, without saying that the Grad missiles had been launched from al-Shuruq.

[See video al-Arabiya: <http://youtube.com/watch?v=195u-HgC47c>  
<http://maillist.tehila.gov.il/t/1161/4501/544/0/>]

Journalists say that the Israeli Army did sporadically hack into radio frequencies during the conflict, of radio *Sawt al-Sha'b* and of al-Aqsa television. The Israeli Army communications services apparently broadcast without the knowledge of the media concerned, propaganda messages calling on Palestinians to stop supporting Hamas. The Israeli authorities deny these accusations.

Israeli officials consider that at no time were the Palestinian journalists who were killed or wounded targeted as such. It was a case of "collateral damage", said Yigal Palmor, spokesman for the foreign ministry.

## **Extremely difficult working conditions**

There were estimated to be more than 700 journalists working in the autonomous territory when Hamas took control by force in June 2007.

Throughout the conflict, Palestinian journalists worked in extremely difficult conditions: exposed to danger while moving around, work equipment destroyed, press vehicles damaged, reduced staffing levels because of journalists killed and injured, and cuts to power and telephone networks.

Without electricity, journalists had to rely on generators with often insufficient output. The agency *Ramattan* and *al-Aqsa* television used mobile broadcast studios. The *Palestine Media Production (PMP)* sent footage down fibre optic cables to Jerusalem or to the West Bank, from where they were transmitted by satellite. Its director general told Reporters Without Borders in an interview that he had not been able to meet all the demands.

Journalists had to limit their movements during the day because of the danger, a problem that was worsened by a shortage of bullet-proof vests and the fact that many press vehicles were damaged during the offensive. Moreover, from 5pm onwards, it became dangerous for any Gaza resident to get about, to the extent that most journalists stopped going home and spent the night at their media offices. Imad al-Franji, de *al-Quds TV*, told Reporters Without Borders that he had not been home for five days in a row. Atef Abu Rami, head of the *Palestine Media & Communication Company*, had fixed up an apartment in the al-Jawhara tower where journalists working with him could live for the duration of the conflict.

Being separated from their families put them under even more pressure. Journalists frequently continued to work without stopping, or almost, said Shohdi el-Kashef, head of the *Ramattan* agency. A strong solidarity developed between the different agencies so they could overcome the technical, material and human difficulties.

All of them complained about the fact that, unlike most foreign journalists, they had no insurance coverage in wartime.

### **How can information be gathered and checked against this background?**

Since journalists' capacity to move about was limited, gathering and checking information proved difficult. Most of the work was done on the phone, information sometimes coming live from hospital staff. Most journalists have a subscription to news wires by text. VHF radios were particularly useful for receiving and transmit information, particularly during power cuts, as Saleh el-Masry, manager of radio *al-Quds Voice* explained.

[Photo Gaza 7 telephone]

Journalists told Reporters Without Borders that Hamas succeeded in sending media messages, by videotape, text message and email. Samir Abu Mohsen of *al-Aqsa TV*, said some tapes were only given to his channel, while other were distributed to all the news agencies.

### **How did Hamas behave towards journalists?**

One Palestinian journalist stressed that neither the Israeli Army nor Hamas allowed Palestinian journalists to cover the conflict properly.

Many Gaza journalists said in confidence that Hamas "used" the Palestinian media during this conflict, but no-one was prepared to say so on camera for fear of reprisals. One of them, speaking on condition of anonymity, said: "Hamas controlled information during the war. The *BBC*, *AP* and *AFP* are all under its control. No open criticism can be made against Hamas. Journalists in Gaza do not have complete freedom." He also cited the example of a Palestinian journalist working for Israel's *Channel 10*, who reported on Hamas arms smuggling via the tunnels from the Gaza Strip into Egypt two days before the start of the conflict and who was afterwards threatened by Hamas.

Another Palestinian journalist recounted that three days before the conflict started, he wrote an article saying that Israel would bombard the Hamas tunnels in the event of an attack. After it appeared, Hamas officials came and threatened his editor. The journalists fear attack from the most radical members of Hamas.

One manager of a Palestinian radio made a point of talking about the pressure, particularly after his staff interviewed people living on the West Bank. He received telephone threats from Hamas members advising him to stop broadcasting this kind of programme. He stressed that the radio was protected by the Islamic Jihad, which operates alongside Hamas, but he fears suffering the same fate as Fatah journalists, many of whom were arrested or forced to take refuge on the West Bank after Hamas took control of the Gaza Strip in June 2007.

One correspondent working for the *Ramattan* news agency was brutally assaulted by Hamas supporters for reporting on an event that "he should not have covered". Hamas fighters also refused to allow journalists' access to Zeitoun, a district in the south of Gaza City. Some said that Hamas made use of the fact that foreign journalists were unable to enter the Gaza Strip to carry out abuses that would never be shown, since Palestinian reporters feared for their or their families' lives.

It is true to say that Palestinian journalists did not film Hamas fighters firing rockets. Questioned about this, they all said that there were no Hamas combatants in the streets.

Hamas deputy information minister, Dr Abu Hasheish, said Hamas had not obstructed the work of journalists. "Everyone can openly criticise Hamas, without any problem", he said. Except nobody does...

## WHAT WAS MEDIA COVERAGE OF THIS WAR LIKE?

Despite the fact that foreign journalists were forced to kick their heels at the gates of Gaza, there was no news "black out" during this war. Palestinian journalists on the spot continued to work, to produce reports and provide film to foreign media.

One Palestinian journalist pointed out the Israelis could very well have seen to it that no footage got out of Gaza, by cutting fibre optic cables linking many Palestinian media to satellites or by bombarding mobile broadcast studios.

### **Patriotic coverage in the Israeli press, and under the sign of the martyr in the Arab media.**

Israeli media, with a few exceptions, expressed clear support for the military offensive, as illustrated by the work of Keshev, an Israeli NGO specialising in media-monitoring. Its director, Yizhar Be'er, explained to Reporters Without Borders the extent to which the media, particularly the newspaper *Yedioth Aharonoth*, showed itself to be patriotic and militant throughout the fighting. "The terms used to cover the conflict were all appropriate to competition, of enthusiasm, even euphoria," he said. Some voices were raised against it, such as those of Guidon Levy and Amira Hass, journalists on the daily *Haaretz*. But for Nahum Barnea, of *Yedioth Aharonoth*, it was clear that Israeli public opinion wanted "a good war", explaining a certain "dictatorship of opinion" on the way in which Israeli media covered the news. According to Yizhar Be'er, Israeli newspapers made little of the fact that the Gaza Strip was closed to foreign journalists. Israeli journalists did not in any numbers support their foreign colleagues in their representations to the Supreme Court.

Footage shown on prime time television in Israel showed the destruction caused to Israeli towns by Hamas rockets, the consequences for society of new call-ups of reservists and the problems of residents in the south of the country after being evacuated for security reasons. The Gaza casualties were very often overshadowed. Israeli public opinion strongly criticised the few voices raised against the offensive, or those who had reservations. "People did not want to hear it", said Nahum Barnea. So, "They were shown what they wanted to see", added Charles Enderlin, permanent correspondent in Israel for *France 2* television and committee member of the FPA. Sarit Michaeli, of the NGO, B'Tselem, was definite about it: "The problem was not the lack of reports in the Israeli media, but the reports themselves".

The only sources of information used by the local media were military, stressed Yizhar Be'er, and they were never questioned. This policy contrasts with the second Lebanon war, during which many Israeli journalists reported in the field. Sarit Michaeli explained why, on 8 January, Israeli human rights NGOs condemned the stance of the Israeli media, whom they accused of gagging criticism against the Gaza Strip offensive. These organisations set up an alternative source of information in the form of a blog ([www.gazaeng.blogspot.com](http://www.gazaeng.blogspot.com)).

This *de facto* monopoly of the army as source of information for the Israeli media, led the FPA to make an appeal on 15 January, for a boycott of photos and film made available by the Israeli defence forces.

Meanwhile, Arab television channels showed footage on a loop of bodies blown apart, women crying over their dead children and of wrecked houses.

Israel and Hamas threw themselves into a media propaganda war during the conflict, particularly online. The Israeli Army used the video-sharing website YouTube to show "its struggle against the terrorists of Hamas using civilians as human shields". Hamas hit back on another such website, PalTube, revealing the "massacres" carried out by the Jewish state in Gaza and praising Hamas's armed wing and its martyrs.

### **Who won the media war?**

Israeli authorities reply to this question with another question: How could Israel benefit from the closure, while the only images coming out of Gaza were provided by Palestinian journalists?

This should be nuanced however. The fact that the only images of the conflict in Gaza were made by Palestinian media prompted the international media to use them cautiously. In the opening days of the conflict the international media put the public on its guard, warning that no foreign reporter had been able to confirm the authenticity of the images produced by Palestinian journalists. These warnings tailed off as the days went on.

Palestinian journalists complain of not have been seen as "real journalists". One manager of *Ramattan*, which provided footage for the *BBC*, *CNN*, *Channel 4*, *France 24*, and others, told Reporters Without Borders, with anger and resentment: "We are not credible because we are Palestinian. Anyone is considered to be better than us and this even if we have long years of media experience. Today we need to feel that we are no less worthy than others and that we provide work of quality".

Adnan Abu Hasna, spokesman in Gaza for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) for Palestinian refugees, created in 1952, stressed that "the Palestinians lost the media battle", by concentrating on the emotional effects, showing on a loop footage of women mourning their dead children, bodies of children torn apart in bombardments, thus trivialising their deaths. While the Israelis, he said, enhanced the importance of their dead soldiers and civilians, by showing them as heroes. "By sending foreign media raw footage, stripped of all analysis and commentary, Palestinian media failed to show the history of these people, to show their suffering", he concluded.

Emad Eid, bureau chief in Gaza for the news agency *Ma'an*, explained that since the start of the conflict, journalists tried to give the dead a face. "Every wounded individual has a story that we must tell today", he told Reporters Without Borders. Today we are doing the work we were not able to do yesterday."

Head of communications for B'Tselem, Sarit Michaeli, recognised the quality of the work of Palestinian journalists during the conflict. But she added that foreign media would had given another viewpoint including by showing footage of Hamas combatants, and investigating allegations that they launched rockets from civilian areas.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Reporters Without Borders strongly condemns Israeli attacks against buildings housing Palestinian or foreign media. The organisation calls on the Israeli Army and government to quickly provide detailed information about hits on these buildings.

The United Nations should demand to take part in these investigations along with the drawing up conclusions. Non-governmental organisations should also be involved. Reporters Without Borders is willing to contribute independently to these investigations.

Previous investigations carried out by the Israeli Army into the death of journalists or bombing of media have led to unacceptable results, exonerating soldiers from all responsibility and therefore from any punishment. In the case of operation "Cast Lead", it is vital that the facts are known and the reasons for shooting at journalists and media be established irrefutably.

Reporters Without Borders maintains that closing the Gaza Strip to the press constitutes a serious and unacceptable violation of press freedom. The reasons given by the Israeli authorities are not convincing and do not in any way justify such a violation of freedom of information. Here also, the organisation strongly urges the United Nations to adopt a resolution immediately calling on Israel to stop using such coercive methods to control information. Controlling information during hostilities, for which the Israeli Army made itself completely responsible, is outrageous and should be condemned by the international community.

Today, there is a severe shortage of journalistic equipment in the Gaza Strip: film and stills cameras, cars, editing equipment, generators were damaged or destroyed. Apart from what can be got through secretly in smuggling tunnels, Israel controls all supplies and goods getting into the Gaza Strip. The Israeli authorities refuse, for example, to let in bullet-proof vests, which are however essential for journalists covering wars, arguing that they could be used by combatants. Reporters Without Borders calls on the state of Israel to show discretion in its control of goods entering the Gaza Strip. Vital press equipment should benefit from the same treatment as humanitarian aid. The organisation proposes to organise, with the agreement of the Israeli authorities, a transport of press equipment to the Gaza Strip.

As for Hamas, since the end of hostilities, the Islamist movement has tightened its control of the Gaza Strip. Reporters Without Borders urges the Hamas government to allow journalists to do their job in complete safety and freedom. It is not true that the Gaza-based press is free to criticise Hamas policy or to speak in favour of strengthened ties with Fatah and the president of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbas. Leaders of the Islamist movement must stop threatening and arresting journalists who criticise them, give the stance of other factions or simply express differing opinions.