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# Opinion // In 2014, UN Schools Offered Precious Shelter for Gaza's Civilians. Then Israel Bombed Them

Israel never denied knowing the UNRWA schools it struck three years ago were civilian shelters. I know they knew, because I compiled the lists of emergency shelters sent to them

Marilyn Garson | Jul 26, 2017 10:25 AM

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A Palestinian boy writes on a shrapnel riddled blackboard at the heavily damaged Sobhi Abu Karsh school in Gaza City's al-Shejaea neighbourhood. August 5, 2014. Credit: AFP / MOHAMMED ABED

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A season of Israeli-Palestinian anniversaries will soon see seven more: the schools.

During the 2014 war in [Gaza](#), Israel's armed forces struck seven UNRWA schools where Gazans sheltered beneath the [UN flag](#). The subsequent UN Secretary-General's [Board of Inquiry found](#) that "at least 44 [Palestinians](#) were killed as a result of Israeli actions and at least 227 were injured at United Nations premises being used as emergency shelters."

The report also noted that Palestinian militants stored weapons in three locked, empty schools, which were not being used as shelters.

The [IDF](#) has offered a range of statements about the seven strikes on Gazan schools, but they have not denied knowing that the buildings were shelters. They knew.

I reminded them regularly. As a member of UNRWA's emergency response team in Gaza, I compiled the details of schools that

became Designated Emergency Shelters for displaced Gazans.

The lists, sent to the IDF co-ordinating offices, created no *new* obligation. The IDF was already obliged to comply with International Humanitarian Law, to distinguish between civilian and military objects, and exercise precautions each time it targeted and fired. No party can absolve itself of these obligations, which apply at all times in armed conflict.

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UNRWA's shelter lists merely added specifics, in order to facilitate the IDF's adherence to their existing obligations. The lists additionally assured the protection of clearly marked buildings, and the human beings who sought safety within them.

Living beneath the bombardment of Gaza, I clung to and resented those lists and the law behind them. Law offered such tenuous protection from violence. It shielded one building and left the neighbour to its fate. Law felt woefully weak – yet the law also affirmed our civilized work in progress. Law sought to minimize war's harms, distinguish and protect its non-combatants.

**Palestinian children, who fled their family homes in the northern border town of Beit Lahiya, sleep in a UN-run school in Gaza City. July 14, 2014. Credit: REUTERS**

With each list, I hoped to equip Israel's better angels. Humanitarian law does that. It equalizes us, because we all have people to protect.

As a Jew, I had people on both sides, facing grossly asymmetrical dangers. Blockade walls locked Gazan civilians into the battle.

293,000 of them were eventually shoehorned into UNRWA's ninety bursting shelter schools. The dire conditions attested that people had nowhere else to go. The schools offered them a roof, a flag and a law.

An IDF heat-seeking anti-tank missile hit a Deir al Balah shelter school on July 23. I thought for a deathly moment that the list must have designated the wrong building. But there was no error.

When missiles struck a Beit Hanoun shelter schoolyard and step on July 24, I disbelieved. They were evacuating – it made no sense at all. I clung to my doubt until the evidence and the Board of Inquiry attributed the strikes to the IDF.

All of northern Gaza seemed to be in churning motion by then, fleeing the obliteration of Shuja'iyya and the smoking craters of Beit Hanoun. Thousands of people crammed into one of the shelter schools in Jabalia. Four IDF 155 mm artillery shells hit the school without warning, killing 17 and injuring 99 while they slept in the pre-dawn of July 30. The IDF said the school had not been the object of the attack.

On August 3, the IDF killed 15 people at a Rafah shelter, in the course of a targeted assassination at the schoolgate. Once they realized that it was a shelter, the IDF said, it was too late to call off the strike.

**Blood and belongings of displaced Palestinians left after fighting between Israeli forces and Hamas militants near a U.N. school in Beit Hanoun, Gaza. July 24, 2014.** Credit: AP

I will not list all seven. Each school strike proved the futility of protection behind a blockade, and killed Gazans who were doing what they had been told to do. People in the shelters had, as ordered, abandoned their homes and everything they owned. Captive, they staked their lives on the law of a marked shelter. The school strikes betrayed them. On the nights when more than one bomb rained down each minute, where could a Gazan go to be safe?

The press quoted public figures who "watched in horror". Dumb and trembling from lack of sleep, I read this liberal meme bitterly: You have to do more than watch!

I left Gaza in September, 2015, after four years and two wars. From the moment the gates of Gaza locked me out, I became one of the people who watches. Changing seats has been harder than I expected.

Within Gaza, loving people on both sides, I saw the conflict through their jeopardy. I saw strategies of war that mocked their civilian protections. I saw the asymmetry through the legal codes which can assign proportionate and specific accountability. I had a unifying language and a volcanic anger, which I (mostly) directed at the monster of unaccountable violence.

Beyond Gaza, the conflict becomes a brittle, totalizing, closed, political argument. What can a spectator do, when all the oxygen goes to shouting?

When I speak about Gaza, I meet people who are not indifferent to the suffering. They are unrepresented by fixed, ideological voices. They are looking for a humane way to act.

We – I count myself among them – will not make peace from here. We can only wage the tug of war that will raise the cost of the status quo, and reward resolution.

**Shrapnel holes are seen on a decorated wall in the heavily damaged Sobhi Abu Karsh school in Gaza City's Shujaiyeh neighborhood. August 5, 2014. Credit: AFP**

Gazans urgently need our protection from the violence. Protection is not a solution; it is the salvaging of life in the interim. We give and work for the agencies that preserve civilian life and seek the realization of human rights. We insist that our own governments spent and aid and enforce in accordance with the conventions they have signed; rather than subsidising the management of a bloody stasis. We support those who invoke legal accountability. We cross lines and steel ourselves to learn from interpretations unlike our own. We work together, while Palestinians formulate a vision of their own liberation. We refuse to turn away and wring our hands, because that is not what hands are for.

The work of preserving life extends beyond Gaza, of course. There are many wars and larger communities at risk. However, no battle

theater has been as deliberately constructed as the civilian trap of Gaza. No waste of life is more avoidable.

Western governments enable the blockade. They defray its cost with our money. We bear an added obligation to protect the people of Gaza, to call that violence to account, and ultimately to resolve that conflict and dismantle its walls.

The school strikes provide seven keen reminders of our unmet obligations. Every external assessment of the war that I have read, describes actions (by all belligerents) that could constitute crimes. There are discrepancies between Israel's internal reports and the external investigations.

That is not where it ends. That is the basis for adjudication and accountability.

I am not the judge of anyone's crimes, but I was a witness:  
J'accuse.

*Marilyn Garson worked with conflict-affected communities for nearly two decades, including Afghanistan (2005-2010) and the Gaza Strip (2011-2015). She writes from New Zealand and blogs at [Contrapuntal: Transforming Gaza](#).*

*The views here do not represent Mercy Corps or UNRWA.*



**Marilyn Garson**

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