THE DISEASED “TERROR TUNNELS” IN GAZA: ISRAELI SURVEILLANCE AND THE AUTOIMMUNIZATION OF AN ILLIBERAL DEMOCRACY

MAROUF HASIAN, JR.

“… that threat might seem exaggerated to some … like a cancer that attacks a particular part of the body. But left unchecked, that cancer grows, metastasizing…. Nor would you let terrorists dig dozens of terror tunnels under your borders to infiltrate your towns.”

— Benjamin Netanyahu (2014, paras. 5, 26)

Several years have passed since the end of the 51-day Gaza-Israeli War (2014), labelled Operation Protective Edge (OPE) by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), and there has been no shortage of dehumanization rhetorics to characterize the alleged dangers to Israeli civilians and soldiers that come from so-called “terror tunnels.” Many of those who share Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s worries about the “cancerous” growth of the “Hamas regime” (Harakat al-Muqāwamah al- ‘Isāmīyyah—Islamic Resistance Movement) do not dwell on the massive, overwhelming control of the land, sea, and air in this region by the Israelis. Instead, pro-Israeli writers used medicalized and mediated tropes to magnify “subterranean” threats, which help to create the impression that this is all part of an ongoing “war” between symmetrically matched foes. As I explain in more detail below, what were once considered by many in Israel and the international communities (especially in the USA and the UK) to be “smuggling tunnels” have been transformed into haunted and deadly spaces and places where countless terrorists wielding an assortment of weapons can terrorize Israeli foes.

It is also no coincidence that at the very time that organizations like Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the United Nations circulated reports about potential Israeli violations of “international humanitarian law”
(IHL) during the execution of OPE, the Israelis countered by trying to deflect attention away from Israeli drones, jets, artillery, tanks, etc., and toward the activities of the Palestinians in Gaza who either build tunnels or hide subterranean networks. Literal and figurative metaphors associated with the medicalized or securitized horrors associated with these “infiltration,” “terror,” or “subterranean” tunnels are then discursively linked to other dense layers of arguments about Hamas rockets or other catastrophic weapons. Israeli casualty figures were kept low during OPE, in theory, because of the willingness of the IDF to spend money on bomb shelters as well as the efficacy of the famous “Iron Dome.”

After 2014, both mainstream and alternative presses became preoccupied with the topic of the terror tunnels, and permutations of arguments about these particular spaces and places appeared in discussions about everything from tourism in Gaza to the need for the US and Israel to sign pacts and resolutions that displayed bilateral interest in countering these subterranean, terrorist threats. While some of the commentary about the terror tunnels has appeared in elite military or legal outlets that discuss in great detail the legality and morality of Israeli’s rights to intervene in Gaza and fight conflicts there according to what the militaries call the “law of armed conflict” (LOAC), there are also daily journalistic commentaries that remind ordinary citizens in Israel that they must constantly be vigilant if they wish to survive in inhospitable lands.

Identity politics and cultural explanations have become entangled in the legal and moral commentaries about the terror tunnels, and the processes of discovering, reporting on, and destroying the tunnels have become mass-mediated events that bind those living in places like Tel Aviv to those who may be living in settlements near Gazan borders. At the same time, the performative acts that take place when journalists and others write and talk about the terror tunnels help viewers and listeners to understand the supposed radical differences that exist between the Islamic societies that would support Hamas and the righteous Zionists who know about the importance of steadfastness and shows of martial strength as deterrence. Again, in theory, twenty-first century Israelis are “modern” and want “calm” and are willing to go to their bomb shelters while Gazans who supported the Hamas regime are vilified for having squandered their limited resources on building tunnels instead of shelters.

All of these identity politics and other cultural markers of difference are also used to explain how some nations do or do not violate the LOAC or treaties when they decide to act in particular ways in and around the Gaza Strip. For example, in the same speech that included the epigraph cited above,
Netanyahu told a UN audience that Israel “surgically struck at the rocket launchers and the tunnels,” and that the “Palestinians civilians” who died during OPE were “unintentionally killed” (Netanyahu, 2014, para. 28). Yet what the Israeli Prime Minister did not mention is that for weeks Israeli missiles did intentionally target the “infrastructures” that housed hundreds of thousands of civilians and Hamas officials. His remarks provided international readers and viewers with typical diplomatic condensations—symbols that were parts of binary, yet ideologically dense, media tropes that helped explain how Israeli incursions into Gaza, unlike Palestinian attacks on IDF troops, were necessitous cures for the terrorist ills that confronted both Israel and the West.

In this typical counterterrorist narrative, Netanyahu did his best to juxtapose the restraining hand of an Israeli Zionist democracy with the uncivilized Muslim fanaticism of ISIS, Hamas, and the Iranians who might want to “trigger the apocalyptic return of an Imam from the 9th century” (Netanyahu, 2014, para. 11). There will be academics who will contend that this type of hyperbolic diplomatic discourse has little to do with actual military or securitized manoeuvring in the Palestinian-Gaza conflict, but it would be a mistake to trivialize the representative nature, and the impact, of this type of governmentality.

The Israeli Prime Minister’s commentaries on both OPE and the supposed defensive postures of the Israelis when faced with the “terror tunnels” involve more than the mere rhetoric of a single elite or empowered rhetor. If Netanyahu’s representative medicalized grammatology resonates with the “Far Right” in Israel (Blumenthal, 2014), one wonders just how many other IDF soldiers or how many other pro-Israelis also share these ideological assumptions and beliefs?

For critical scholars who are interested in the study of Foucauldian epistemes or institutional hegemonic dispositifs in securitized and militarized contexts, it will be imperative to unpack and decode the military, legal, and cultural signifiers that are used to magnify the supposed dangers that are posed by these terror tunnels. If, as Michel Foucault (1977/1980) once noted, dispositifs are those heterogeneous assemblages of institutional, administrative, or physical apparatuses that are used to convey elite and tacit knowledge (pp. 194–228), then we need to study how the materiality or physicality of the terror tunnels has been linked to the “social bodies” that can maintain power over individuals and populations. Interdisciplinary researchers need to see how rhetoric about the terror tunnels is used to converse about psychological and existential biopolitical lives and thanatopolitical threats, and this in turn
influences how others outside of the Middle East view these Gazan-Israeli conflicts.

One of the arguments that I will be making in this essay is that far too many scholars who write about Gazan affairs focus on the realpolitik power of the “Far Right” in Israel (often credited with empowering Prime Minister Netanyahu and his Cabinet during OPE)\(^1\) while they focus too little on what Bruno Latour and many others have called the “dingpolitik” of contemporary cultures, which has to do with the politics associated with things and objects.

This dingpolitik dimension of Gazan-Israeli conflicts manifests itself in various ways that are linked to the terror tunnels. For example, those who hear warning sirens and rush to shelters are often the ones who send in letters to the editors of outlets like the Jerusalem Post or Ha’aretz, demanding protection from terrorist neighbours. Discourse surrounding the acoustic horrors associated with hearing tunnelling underneath border homes, or essays on the psychological damages that come from constantly worrying about rockets or Hamas raids, can be used to magnify the numbers of social agents who help produce and recirculate persuasive dispositifs about tunnel exigencies. Discussions of the “terror tunnels” within Israeli societies thus reproduces, reflects, and refracts the very same mediated tropes that appear in IDF websites or in Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs blogs. The worlds of dingpolitik and realpolitik blur as Israeli leaders and populations discursively connect these tunnels to other objects like bunkers, fences, drones, shelters, rockets, etc. that all become a naturalized part of Israel-Gazan daily securitizing affairs.

At the same time that I highlight the ubiquitous nature of both the elite and populist nature of these rhetorics, I want to underscore the repetitive nature of the argumentative strategies that are used to produce what I consider to be threat inflation. Between 2014 and 2016, countless arguments were circulated by Israeli journalists, IDF spokespersons, representatives of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and respected think-tanks in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, which tried to emphasize the “surprise” that came from the militant Palestinian usage of “new” tunnels during OPE. But all of this talk of the latest existential danger from Palestinians was old wine in new bottles; Israel has been writing about the “infiltration” of Palestinian Arabs since the 1948 Israeli War of Independence.

---
\(^1\) See, for example, the insightful work of Blumenthal (2014), who talks about “politicide” and the persuasive power of the Israeli Far Right. Although I am a great admirer of his work, I believe he underestimates the resonance of some of these militaristic and securitizing rhetorics surrounding existential Hamas—or Palestinian threats—especially after 2000—among the broader Israeli public.
The twenty-first century iteration that focuses on stopping this infiltration is insidious for several reasons. First, it reinforces the idea that Israelis are not occupying Palestinian lands, but are just preventing encroachment from those who do not understand that Israelis are merely “recovering” the Biblical lands of places like “Judea” and “Samaria.” At the same time, by constantly harping on the weekly activities of Hamas rocketeers and Palestinian tunnel builders, Israeli leaders and supportive audiences are helping their listeners anticipate the next Gazan incursion. Third, by highlighting the depravity of those who turn smuggling tunnels into weaponized tunnels, IDF defenders can show that the most “moral army” in the world not only knows about, but respects, the IHL principles of distinction, proportionality, humanity, and necessity. In contrast, as I explain in more detail below, Palestinian women and men who build tunnels are portrayed as individuals who should, and do, lose their “non-combat” status as they help build Hamas “infrastructure.”

Since the fall of 2014, there have been many excellent interdisciplinary studies of the “politics of verticality” (Graham, 2016) that have focused on the trials and tribulations of those disempowered in Gaza who regularly contend with blockading, targeted assassinations, the West Bank’s “Separation Wall,” and other examples of the material objects that are a part of this particular dingpolitik. We are just beginning to unpack some of the affective and the cognitive features of what I argue are the autoimmunizing discourses that have been produced to justify the dispensation of mass violence in recent Israeli/Palestinian conflicts. Timothy Campbell, writing in 2008, argued that if we look back through the mists of time, and if readers think about what has happened since September 11, 2001, it wouldn’t be hard to “imagine we are in the midst of a full-scale autoimmunity crisis whose symptomology” was diagnosed by Jacques Derrida and Roberto Esposito (p. xix). Judith Butler (2010), reviewing this same phenomenon from a slightly different angle, remarked in her Frames of War that the US seemed to be trying to “immunize itself against the thought of its own precariousness” (p. 48) when it engaged in destructive foreign interventionism. For example, rather than treating the acts of Osama bin Laden as criminal matters that required the more moderate intervention of the FBI and domestic criminal investigations, the attacks on the Twin Towers were configured as military or securitized acts of war. What could have been confined to the pursuit of the individuals who carried out the act on the Twin Towers quickly morphed into an all out “War on Terror” against various foes, including but not limited to Al Qaeda. The number of enemies grew daily as US and international audiences heard about the litany of crimes that were perpetrated by thousands of foreigners who fought network-centric
warfare in the name of Al Qaeda and the Taliban. All different types of acts could be labelled as threats to “Homeland Security.” The invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq became simply the precursors of “extraterritorial” ventures where autoimmunity talk of stopping the spread of “cancerous” terrorist cells became the taken-for-granted grammars that have been used throughout the Global War on Terror (GWOT).

The Israeli dispositifs had features that resembled these American “war on terror” epistemes, but talk of the terror tunnels also tapped into culturally specific regional ideologies that had been circulating since the time of what Palestinians call Al-Nakba, or the “catastrophe,” when at least 700,000 Palestinian Arabs either “fled” or were forcibly removed from parts of what would become Israel. Magnifying the dangers of the terror tunnels was another way of staving off possible interventionism on the part of the UN Security Council or the International Criminal Court, allowing Israel to frame Gazan tunnel construction as justification for self-defence.

Talk of the tunnels helped Israelis blunt some of the political fallout that came from post-Gazan incursion talk of memoricide, urbanicide, “spacio-cide” (Hanafi, 2009), or even genocide. The last thing Israelis want to see is some UN peacekeeping force—using the principle of “responsibility to protect”—appearing on the borders of Gaza, in the towns of the occupied West Bank, or East Jerusalem quarters. Magnifying terror tunnel dangers helps Israelis appear to be moderate and realistic social actors who are following the LOAC as they “mow the lawn” in Gaza.

Where do these constitutive, mass-mediated tropes about “terror tunnels” appear and how are they used to collectively punish Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank? How is the discursive construction of “infested” terror tunnels symbolically linked to the social agency of Gazan populations, and what technical and other materials solutions are offered by Israeli military or diplomatic spokespersons who want to stave off, or counter, international criticism of Gazan incursions? Do these Israeli attempts at what Jacques Derrida calls “autoimmunity” resonate with most Israelis, including leftists or liberals, and are there any vocal and empowered critics inside and outside of Israel who contest the empiricism or the normative claims that have become a part of the rhetorical horizons for tunnelling in the aftermath of OPE? Is it possible that “post-heroic” worries about protecting Israeli troops and the vilification of Gazan populations have also successfully set the stage for the pragmatic end of “two-solutions” and the international communities’ acceptance of “Judea” and “Samaria” as real geopolitical entities?
In order to help answer those types of queries I will be begin by presenting readers with a brief overview of some of the Israeli rhetorical histories that make visible the hauntologies of terror tunnels that circulated long before the advent of Operation Protective Edge in 2014. The second segment of the essay illustrates how interest in terror tunnels spiked during the first few weeks of OPE, and how Israeli officials and laypersons used visual and textual arguments to explain the magnitude of the dangers that were posed by the “terror tunnels.” The third portion of the essay extends this analysis by highlighting how massive bombardments and incursions into Gaza were configured as matters of medical or military necessity. The concluding section of the essay invites readers to contemplate the long-term realpolitik impact of all of this dingpolitik attention that is paid to the Gazan tunnels.

Surveilling and Diagnosing Palestinian Diseases Before OPE

In spite of the fact that smuggling tunnels in Gaza have been around since the time of Alexander the Great, media interest in reporting on their existence has waxed and waned. For my purposes here, it should be noted that worries about Gazan threat escalated after 2000, when many Israeli security officers and militarists no longer viewed themselves as the “belligerent” occupiers of the West Bank involved in primarily policing activities. Now, with the advent of the Second Intifada, Palestinian dissent was reconfigured as terrorism that threatened those Israelis living in both rural and urban areas.

Ariel Sharon’s controversial decision to convince Israelis to relinquish the Gaza Strip and voluntarily “disengage” from Gaza set the stage for the rise of Hamas as well as that organization’s characterization as a terrorist organization in US and Israeli elite discourses. Palestinians in Gaza voting Hamas into power as their Palestinian representatives catalyzed the efforts of Israelis who set up buffer zones, stopped employee travel into Israel, and

---

2 In 2005 savvy Israeli decision-makers decided to “disengage” from Gaza so that they could use their psychic and social energies to build up identities and the forensic architecture of “Judea” and “Samaria” on the West Bank, and the rise of Hamas has helped Israelis frame their continued settler colonization and incursions into occupied territories as counterterrorist efforts that help both Israelis and the rest of the world that needs to be protected from Islamic jihads and radical Arab extremism. In spite of the countless petitions, investigations into alleged Israeli allegations of violations of international humanitarian law (IHL) after Operation Protective Edge, and increased NGO and activist involvement in trying to help the women and children in Gaza, much of the world—perhaps preoccupied with other migrant crises, drone proliferation, wars against ISIS, and the perpetual war against the Taliban and Al Qaeda—has essentially abandoned and accepted the political, military, and social marginalization of both Hamas and the civilian populations living in the Gaza Strip.
blockaded the Gazan coast. This in turn led to massive spikes in talk of the “smuggling” tunnels that became the conduits for Gazans who tunnelled into places like Egypt in search for supplies. The Israelis, worried about the militarization of Hamas, started to circulate thanatopolitical rhetorics about how to put the Gazan population on a “diet.” One of the dieticians working for the Israeli Health Ministry, for example, was consulted on how best to prove the “minimum requirements for the sustenance of Gaza Strip residents” without “inflicting a humanitarian disaster” (Mondoweiss, Staff, “The Gaza Diet,” 2009, para. 1).

Defenders of the smuggling tunnels oftentimes cited the words of Dov Weisglass, an adviser to Ehud Olmert, the then-Israeli Prime Minister, who allegedly said that Israel’s planned response to the Palestinian legislative elections in 2006 was to “put Palestinians on a diet, but not to make them die of hunger” (Cook, 2012, para. 1-2). Thanks to the efforts of an Israeli Human Rights Group, Israeli authorities were forced to reveal the existence of a “Red Lines” document (2008) that indicated that Israeli health officials were calculating the minimum number of calories needed by Gaza’s 1.5 million inhabitants to avoid malnutrition, and some of these Red Line computations even took into account the number of truckloads of food that Israel was supposed to allow into Gaza every day (Cook, 2012). Foucauldian critiques of this type of discourse over the control of a population could serve as pro-Palestinian propaganda for those who wish to argue that this was an example of Israel’s dehumanizing treatment of Gazan populations.

Both critics and supporters of Israeli incursions into Gaza—after a 2008/2009 invasion and a 2012 operation—used permutations of biopolitical or thanatopolitical arguments in fascinating ways, characterizing both the smuggling tunnels and their links to various Israeli controlling behaviours or IDF “operations” in Gaza. For example, the United Kingdom’s Guardian once explained to readers how WikiLeaks had come across an Israeli cable from diplomats who were quoted as saying that they “wanted to keep Gaza’s economy on the brink of collapse.” In the same article, Fawzi Barhoum, a spokesperson for Hamas, opined that a WikiLeaks disclosure of what were supposed to be secret cables showed that the Israeli blockade of Gaza was “targeting all human beings” in ways that led to calls that Israelis be tried by the ICC for “crimes against humanity” (Associated Press, 2012, para. 16).

NGOs like Gisha debated with Israeli military spokespersons about the military or civilian usages of everything from the “smuggling tunnels” to the blockades that impacted how much food was flowing into Gaza. While Israeli military analysts argued that they kept track of the typical Gazan’s daily caloric
needs—2,300 calories—for humanitarian biopolitical purposes, their detractors argued that this very decisionism regarding how much food could flow into Gaza put on display the ways in which Israelis were weaponizing food in their ideological battles with Hamas.

In the pre-2014 incursion discourse, it would be the “Hamas rockets” that were often the primary abject objects of horror. However, more than a few Israeli analysts started to produce anecdotal evidence that showed how the smuggling tunnels were being used to bring in materials that could be used to attack Israelis. For example, after Operation Cast Lead (2008–2009), massive numbers of probabilistic tales were told about how Hamas or Hezbollah terrorist operatives were continually trying to “infiltrate” Israeli lands. While Hamas argued that the tunnels were taxed by their government, and were the only means of bringing in everything from Kentucky Fried Chicken to medical supplies through the tunnels, the Israelis argued that the tunnels were being used to bring in rockets and other weapons.

Israeli commentary on the weaponization of the tunnels could thus be used to strategically counter complaints about the illegality of the blockade. While pro-Palestinian supporters spoke of the lifelines that were provided to Gazan populations by the smuggling tunnels, Israelis configured the tunnels as vehicles that might lead to the next “catastrophe.” Instead of using probabilistic rhetorics that focused on the actual number of Israeli dead, or the efficacy of warning sirens or the Iron Dome, IDF spokespersons and American defenders of attacks on the tunnels used probabilistic rhetorics that took into account “thwarted” terror tunnel attacks.

Long before OPE, many generations of Israeli warfighters, who wanted to rationalize their own periodic incursions into Gaza since the 1990s, had consistently written or talked about how “smuggling” tunnels were actually asymmetrical weapons that were a part of “subterranean warfare.” In 2009, for example, the Israel Security Agency provided a cliché-filled summary of what motivated Israeli militarists and security forces to carry out Operation Cast Lead:

During Operation “Cast Lead,” IDF forces, on the basis of ISA and army intelligence, struck at more than 300 targets, including: training camps and headquarters, military facilities, 

\[\text{In spite of the fact that Gazan tunnels have been around since at least the time of Alexander the Great, today’s mainstream and alternative media outlets often parrot Israeli claims that this is a “new” form of “counterterrorist” warfare that demands that we ignore the interpretations of the role of the tunnels that is presented by organizations like Amnesty International, the UN, Breaking the Silence, or B’Tselem.}\]
weapon depots and production sites, terror tunnels, the Islamic University (a Hamas bastion in Gaza where weapons are developed and produced), dozens of rocket launching sites and cells, governmental offices and institutions and offices of terror organizations. (Israel Security Agency, 2009, p. 1)

Several points are noteworthy here. First of all, notice the ways in which Israelis are implying that their security forces had the situational awareness to identify “targets.” Then notice how this type of framing blurs the line between civilians and terrorists, police training facilities and military camps, that can all be lumped under the term “infrastructure.” Third, notice the ways that Israelis—as early as 2009—are arguing that schools and holy sites are being used to shield Hamas operatives. The use of the term “infrastructure” could be used to turn any bombed building into a legitimate target for supposed “wars” like Operation Cast Lead.

After 2009, countless Israeli elite and public commentators discussed how the IDF took inordinate precautions to avoid civilian casualties during their military operations, but these rhetorical autoimmunizing templates selectively promoted militarized solutions while assiduously avoiding diplomatic or political solutions to the rocket or tunnel problems. Hamas, after all, was not to be reasoned with.

If anything, when Israelis debated amongst themselves before OPE about what to do about the Gazan tunnels, they spent most of their time debating the best ways to take out cancerous terrorist threats, or the preferred way of engaging in more violent behaviours—including the reoccupation of Gaza, the cutting of off electricity to the Strip, or the need to annex the West Bank before tunnel construction threatened spaces and places like Hebron or Jerusalem. As international critics of Israeli occupation strategies vocalized their disenchantment with Israeli blockading policies, many Israelis responded by emphasizing how IDF forces had restrained themselves in ways that prevented even more civilian deaths during Israeli incursions into Gaza. In the same way that Americans had metaphorically “taken off the gloves” when the CIA tried to track down bin Laden and exterminate terrorists threats in places like Yemen, Pakistan, and Mali, the Israelis often used terror tunnel rhetoric to explain why they needed to counter the Leftist positions of Israelis who called for some modicum of respect for the “rules of engagement” of IHL, or LOAC.

By 2012 Israeli public audiences were used to hearing from their civilian, religious, and military leaders who no longer separated militarist Hamas operatives from Hamas diplomats, and a growing number of Israelis were worried that Hamas might even threat “Judea” and “Samaria” if tunnels
were built in that part of Israel. Gilad Sharon, the son of Ariel Sharon, complained about the lax standards that seemed to have been put in place that were mollycoddling the enemy before Operation Pillar of Defense in 2012. As far as Sharon was concerned, Israelis could no longer accept the half-measures used during the 2008–2009 Operation Cast Lead that were too protective of Gazan lives while allowing many Israelis to live under a “rain of death.” What he suggested is that Israelis quit listening to those who separated Palestinian civilians in the Gaza from the Hamas regime, and he averred that it was time that the world heard the call of the sound of “decisive victory” that would come in the form of a “Tarzan-like cry” that would let the “entire jungle know in no uncertain terms just who won, and just who was defeated” (Sharon, 2012, paras. 1–3). For those who may have any doubts regarding the specific types of drastic measures that might need to be taken in this supposed jungle warfare for the survival of the fittest, Sharon (2012) explained:

The desire to prevent harm to innocent civilians in Gaza will ultimately lead to harming the truly innocent: the residents of southern Israel. The residents of Gaza are not innocent, they elected Hamas. The Gazans aren’t hostages; they chose this freely…. The Gaza Strip functions as a state—it has a government and conducts foreign relations, there are schools, medical facilities, there are armed forces and all the other trappings of statehood…. Why do our citizens have to live with rocket fire from Gaza while we fight with our hands tied? Why are the citizens of Gaza immune? … There is no justification for the State of Gaza being able to shoot at our towns with impunity. We need to flatten entire neighborhoods in Gaza. Flatten all of Gaza. The Americans didn’t stop with Hiroshima—the Japanese weren’t surrendering fast enough, so they hit Nagasaki, too. (paras. 4–7)

Here is a fascinating example of how dingpolitik is symbolically aligned with realpolitik, and how the circulation of mass-mediated fragments and other tropes invites readers and listeners to consider the revamping of traditional Geneva-type protections of populations. Protecting Gazan populations are acts

---

4 In some cases, Israeli diplomats and IDF added their voices to the chorus of those who circulated clarion calls about the horrors of the terror tunnels during their post-hoc debriefings of the “lessons learned” during earlier incursions like Operation Cast Lead (2008–2009). I would argue that much of this rhetoric was used as public diplomacy to counter the claims of international critics who focused attention on the disclosures regarding civilian targeting that appeared in the famous Goldstone Report, that explicitly pointed out the intentionality of some attacks on non-combatants.
that are configured as irresponsible decisions on the part of those who should know better. Notice the intertextual commentary on impunity and immunity that treats militarized or securitized solutions as the best, or perhaps the only, way to avoid fighting terrorists with hands that are tied behind backs.

At the same time that some Israeli civilian leaders rationalized actual or potential attacks on Gazan civilians, their experts on law came up with countless defences of Israeli interpretations of IHL that supposedly put on display the legitimacy and morality of IDF actions during their incursions into Gaza. Law review writers in America and in Israel started to craft essays that explained how UN investigators or Red Cross officials needed to rethink the way that prisoners, civilians, and other supposedly helpless communities should be characterized in counterterrorist situations if enemy populations were “directly participating” in twenty-first-century warfare. Palestinian women and children who helped build tunnels became some of the key characters in these pro-Israeli rhetorics that tried to explain the existential dangers that could flow from the activities of “non-state” terrorist actors.

Between 2009 and 2013, many participants in these “terror tunnel” debates wrote and acted as if commentaries on counterterrorist responses to the tunnels provided the entire world with some Archimedean yardstick that would allow global citizens in a post-heroic world to improve the way that they thought about legal restraints on warfighting with terrorists during asymmetric contests. Israeli think-tanks, after 2012, often circulated Israeli exceptionalist rhetorics that celebrated how the “Israeli mind” could come up with logistical ways of combating terror tunnels, including the building of walls at the outer parameters of buffer zones or the use of seismic equipment for tunnel detection.

Before OPE, one of the largest spikes in Israeli journalistic coverage of the “terror” or “infiltration” tunnels took place during the fall of 2013, when a 1.5 mile-long tunnel was found near Kibbutz Ein HaShlosha. For a period of time, the IDF issued a gag order preventing reportage on this tunnel. But in October of that year, Israeli communities and international readers were bombarded with information about what the BBC called “the Gaza terror tunnel” (BBC, 2013). One Hamas spokesperson, Sami Abu Zuhri, opined that by talking about this tunnel, the Israelis were trying “to justify the blockage and the continuous aggression on the Gaza Strip,” but Defense Minister Moshe Ya’alon informed reporters that the discovery of this particular terror tunnel was “further proof that Hamas continues to prepare for confrontation with Israel” (BBC, 2013, paras, 4, 12). Again, talk of “smuggling” tunnels was now
being sutured together with autoimmunizing discourses that transformed all of this smuggling into infiltration opportunities.

Prime Minister Netanyahu would later complain about the anti-Israeli “telegenic” visual imagery that was being used by critics to undermine the legitimacy of OPE, but during 2013 he himself joined the chorus of those who wrote about how Palestinian tunnel experts were traumatizing or killing Israeli children. One of the most popular of these recirculated narratives noted how explosives were discovered in one tunnel whose target seemed to be a kindergarten in an Israeli kibbutz. This, Israeli outlets reported, was the third such tunnel that would be discovered during the last several months that originated in the Abasan village located near Khan Younis. The Israelis responded to this perceived threat by immediately halting the transfer of construction materials into Gaza. Netanyahu explained that in spite of having some of the “quietest” times in more than a decade, his Cabinet was helping carry out an “aggressive policy against terror” (JTA, 2014, para. 8). Many press outlets carried stories about the dangers to Eretz Israel that were posed by tunnels intent on kidnapping soldiers or civilians.

By the time that international communities heard about the beginning of the 51-day Operation Protective Edge, they had already been presented with untold numbers of Israeli tunnel rhetorics that invited foreigners to sympathize with the plight of Israeli civilians who were allegedly at the mercy of Palestinian terrorists who came out of infiltration tunnels.

Infuriated Israelis demanded that something had to be done about these hazards, and this helped with the rhetorical production of autoimmunizing discourses that put on display what the IDF and security officials were doing to save Israeli lives.

The (Re)Discovery of the “Terror Tunnels” and Requests for the Curative Power of Operation Protective Edge

Before, and during, the first few weeks of OPE in 2014, many of the textual and visual images that were circulated by the IDF, Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), and other pro-Israeli outlets contained many complementary and contradictory positions on the visibility or invisibility of the Gazan tunnels. Given the fact that the IDF and Israel Security Agency had cobbled together polysemic and polyvalent rationales for why Israel needed to continue to securitize both the PA and Gaza after the 2005 “disengagement,” there were no shortage of ways that pro-Israeli defenders could rationalize the shift that took place when the physical movement of Israeli tanks and artillery into Gaza
followed in the wake of distant drone and jet attacks. By the second half of OPE, places like Rafah were levelled in the name of eliminating terror tunnel threats, and Israeli detractors claimed that talk of the tunnels was post-hoc rhetoric used to justify both the war and the methods that were used during the conflict.

Hundreds of ideographic infograms and infographs were circulated during and after OPE in order to help domestic and international audiences visualize the nature and scope of the dangers that were faced by Israelis who invaded Gaza. Figure 1, below, was used for visual argumentation that displayed how terrorists were moving from hidden locations in Shuja’iya and Al Wafa as they crossed borders and infiltrated Israeli territories.

![Gaza Strip Map](image)

*Figure 1: Gaza Strip. Courtesy of Israel Defense Forces*
By naming specific places and using maps and graphs to portray all of this danger, IDF spokespersons could create the impression that the fog of war did not interfere with their strategic and operational plans as they went after identified tunnel targets.

What helped magnify these dangers, and concretize these problems for many Israeli citizens, were the ways that these Gazan tunnel dangers could also be linked symbolically to what was happening in Israel proper (behind the Green Line) or in Judea or Samaria.

Sadly, one of the most effective ways of gaining the adherence of Israeli publics depended on perceptual views regarding the daily existential dangers that were posed when Israeli citizens and soldiers read about dozens of knife attacks that were witnessed during the “third Intifada.” The deaths of three Israeli youths, and the “manhunt” for the alleged Hamas operatives who were accused of abducting and killing Eyal Yifrach, Gilad Shaar, and Naftali Fraenkell, led to the sweeping detentions of Palestinians during Operation Brother’s Keeper (2014). Hamas rockets rained down on Israeli towns and villages in the aftermath of the arrest of dozens of key Palestinian leaders, and within a matter of days, Israeli fighter jets, naval vessels, artillery pieces, and tanks were shelling major sections of Gaza.

After the tank incursions, more “terror tunnels” were discovered in Gaza, and throughout July of 2014, there would be more discussions of the cancerous growth of the terror tunnels. In some cases, tunnels became the spotlighted material objects of inquiry in studies of two-state solution failures, and in other cases pundits wrote about the need to re-occupy Gaza. Those who sought more funding from overseas commented on the American cooperation that was needed to make sure that counter-tunnel technological know-how would stay ahead of Hamas ingenuity.

As this particular operation progressed, global audiences were now presented with argumentative permutations from Israelis that treated OPE as if it was the militaristic or securitized cure for diseased Hamas tunnels. In theory, if Gazan populations wanted to survive and illustrate their neutrality, they needed to avoid Hamas and listen to the warnings that came from IDF communicators or Israel Air Force pilots who told them to move away from “infrastructure.” While Israeli strategists emphasized how they were using leaflets and “knocking on roof” techniques to warn civilians to abandon targeted buildings (Joronen, 2016), Israeli detractors averred that this was just one more traumatizing militaristic tactic because Israeli militarists knew that there was no safe place to run to or hide in Gaza. At the same time that NGOs and other international communities complained about the civilian deaths that
were incurred during attacks on mosques, schools, medical facilities, or other Gazan buildings, Israelis circulated hundreds of infograms and essays on official and non-official websites about “human shields” and webs of tunnels that were a part of terrorists’ “subterranean” warfare.

Netanyahu’s commentaries that were quoted earlier in this essay represented just a tiny sliver of the thick dehumanizing descriptions of the tunnels that were often characterized in ways that implied that either Hamas fighters or Palestinian civilians were vermin, diseases, cockroaches, or other forms of pestilence that required massive interventionism, control, or extermination. “Fighting Hamas is like having an infection,” explained “Arb” in his comments following one July 2014 missile on OPE, and he went on to explain that Hamas activities left Israelis with little choice when they “decided to disinfect it before it becomes dangerous” or continue “to fester and grow until it becomes a very serious threat” (following Sheizaf, 2014). Months later, another blogger suggested that the Israelis needed to wait for the tunnels to be “filled with Jihadists” and then either spray poison gas or pump the tunnels full of bleach because “the only way to clean a sewer pipe is to disinfect it and flush out all the harmful bacteria” (after Barrack, 2014).

These bloggers should not have worried—within a matter of months, Egyptians—allegedly acting on requests from Israelis—were filling tunnels along their border with Gaza with ocean water or other materials that were credited with killing several Palestinians.

In one of the most fascinating examples of how even elite decision-makers involved in protracted and contentious conflicts can try to harness the power of social media outlets to advance their causes, President Netanyahu used Twitter to circulate the image that appears in Figure 2. Although detractors at the website Mondoweiss characterized this as a “cartoon” that had little to do with Gazan realities (North and Weiss, 2014), the purveyors of this image used a familiar binary approach to OPE that would probably resonate with most pro-Israeli viewers. Netanyahu’s infogram puts on display the dinner tables and kindergartens that appear to be the object of Palestinian tunnel infiltration, and the same pictorial contains a thinly veiled critique of NGOs and others who might inadvertently be emboldening Hamas’s misuse of international funds that could have been used in ways that had little to do with building tunnels. Word and deed come together; the “tunnels of terror” are depicted as having nothing to do with jets, tanks, drones, and other Israel weaponry, but have everything to do with potential attacks on Israeli innocents.
This same image also reinforces the notion that homes, hospitals, and mosques were the targetable infrastructures that turned civilian edifices into targets for legal Israeli strikes during OPE.

The aesthetic beauty of these types of tunnel visualizations—filled with allegorical allusions to nationalistic/ethnic colours that allow for coded dichotomous thinking—are used to contextualize the dangers of the Hamas tunnels in alluring ways. Now it is not only adult voters who can follow Netanyahu’s operative logics, but youngsters who are already accustomed to working with the tacit “factual” knowledge that can be conveyed through photographs, selfies, charts, infographics, videos, and other apparatuses. The visual attractiveness of this imagery conveys to viewers who might not read...
IDF military reports or legal responses to international queries the horror that must be confronted in the form of the firing of rockets that threaten Israeli rural and urban settings.

All of this focus on Israeli communities serves several key rhetorical functions. First, this deflects attention away from other mediated frames that might put on display the Palestinian women and children who died in their homes during attacks on tunnel infrastructures. Second, constantly magnifying the “concrete dangers” (Ministry of Israeli Affairs, 2014) creates situations in which arguments about proportionality will always favour aggressors who are working with subjective military interpretations of perceived national emergency and dangers. By using probabilistic scenarios instead of actual consequentialist frames, Israeli military lawyers and Netanyahu’s supporters can always claim that Israelis were following the IHL principle of “proportionality.” This is because the Israelis can claim that the military advantages that were gained by exterminating infiltration tunnels outweigh all incidental loss of Palestinian lives during OPE. At the same time, the elegance of all of these aesthetic infograms, infographs, and YouTube videos produced by “IDF Spokesperson” are made freely available for their supporters, who can use these same pictorials to ornament their textual defences of the latest Gazan incursion.

The very asymmetry of the conflict, where few precious Israeli lives can be contrasted with the alleged uncaring nature of Hamas’s treatment of the dead, serves not as evidence of IHL violations but rather the care that the IDF takes to protect those who defend Judea and Samaria. At times this draconian calculus of grammatical motives may seem irrational to transglobal critics, but it resonates with Israeli audiences who now get to see, as well as believe in, Israeli exceptionalism. What virile Israeli soldiers, regardless of gender, would not be willing to give their lives to make sure that “calm” reigns in Israel through the destruction of detected terror tunnels?

As readers might expect, these types of figurations of OPE, with their presences and absences, did not go unchallenged. Amir Hass (2016), a writer of Ha’aretz, had this to say about some of the militaristic Israeli frames that left out the carnage of OPE:

Behind every erased Gazan family is an Israeli pilot. Behind every orphaned child who has lost his brothers and sisters in the bombing is an Israeli commander who gave the order and a soldier who pulled the trigger. Behind every demolished house are the Israeli physicist and hi-tech specialist who calculated the optimal angles for maximal impact. And there is the army
A spokesperson (backed by legal experts) who always evaded the journalist’s question: how proportional is it to shell an entire building with all its inhabitants? What—in your laws—justifies killing 23 family members, babies, children and the elderly among them, in one fell swoop of a missile? (para. 1)

This, however, was a text produced by one of the few Israeli leftists who was willing to openly critique the IHL interpretations that were offered by Israeli militarists during and after OPE.

By the third week of July 2014, there were few American or Israeli mainstream newspaper, journal, or law review commentaries on Gaza tunnelling that did not recirculate arguments from interviewers who took for granted the existential dangers that were posed by Gazan tunnels. Terrence McCoy, writing for the Washington Post, referred back to the October 2013 reportage on the Ein HaShlosha tunnel before quoting Israel sources that estimated that Hamas had spent some $10 million on some 800 tons of concrete that were used in what was described as a “complex,” two-year project. IDF sources were quoted warning that the tunnels were built to “carry out attacks such as abductions of Israeli civilians and soldiers alike” and that the this led to “infiltrations into Israel communities, mass murders and hostage-taking scenarios” (McCoy, 2014, paras. 1–4).

These scenarios, in turn, were used by those who wanted to see the total destruction of the tunnels, or the massive infusion of money flowing into anti-tunnelling ventures. In the same way that the famed “Iron Dome” performed the biopolitical function of protecting Israeli populations, the financing of walls along buffer zones was supposed to stop the metastasizing of cancerous tunnel threats.

Israeli public requests for money to be spent on anti-tunnelling efforts, as well as the visual and textual magnification of Hamas risks, along with the minimalization of Israeli aggression, provide other examples of what George Bisharat (2013) has called “legal entrepreneurialism,” where Israeli military officers who defend the use of targeted assassinations by drones or attacks on hospitals, schools, and homes justify their actions by using legal and military frameworks that expand the scope of legitimate state violence, while ridiculing international interpretations of the Geneva Convention or other IHL provisions that would limit violence and protect non-combatants (Bisharat, 2013). Sensing that many interpretative communities outside of Israel will never accept the legitimacy or morality of their siege of Gaza and the blockages, fences, drone attacks, and episodic military incursions into Gaza or Judea and Samaria, Israelis write as if their brand of counterterrorism represents the future of
twenty-first century asymmetric warfare. What these pro-Gazan war advocates may not realize is that many of their interpretations of IHL resemble the colonial and imperial arguments that were once used to rationalize aggressive warfare against “barbarians” during colonial emergency campaigns.

Unfortunately, Hamas spokespersons, instead of pointing out the precarity of their situation and the need for democratic solutions to seemingly intractable problems, produced their own medicalized, securitized, and militaristic discourses that also exaggerated the efficacy of the tunnels in real and imagined battles with Israelis. Instead of defending the smuggling tunnels as a legitimate means of carrying on civilian biopolitical life, those who support the more militaristic wing of Hamas try to take pride in the steadfastness of Palestinians who participate in the construction of dangerous tunnels. In an article that appeared in one of the publications for the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, the Hamas leader, Ismail Haniyeh, at a March 2014 rally in Gaza, is quoted as saying:

The tunnels we are inaugurating today are the new Hamas strategy in the war against Israel—the strategy of the tunnels. From belowground and aboveground, you, the occupiers, will be dismissed. You will have no place in the land of Palestine…. What the resistance forces are preparing secretly for the next confrontation with Israel is beyond imagination for Israel. (Rubenstein, 2014)

Again, the tunnels are not new, and all of this alleged secrecy on the part of Hamas involves major bluffs and exaggeration on the part of the radical Palestinian militarists. Civilians in Gaza thus end up ensnared in a dynamic process of problematic dingpolitik and realpolitik that is being produced on all sides by those who write and talk about these terror tunnels.

Obviously there are other ways of configuring the biopolitics of the Gazan smuggling tunnels, and many civilians realize that if this place will ever see peace, it will not come from the persistent attacks on Gaza. In Atef Abu Saif’s Book, *The Drone Eats with Me*, we get a very different point of view of Gazan life during OPE—one that looks nothing like the bluster of Ismail Haniyeh’s vision of tunnel warfare. In his book, Abu Saif self-identifies as a civilian who has to constantly assuage the fears of his children. His loved ones keep asking him when all of the shelling and when the destruction of OPE will end. Saif’s book, as Qualey (2015) explains, is a type of literary engagement that is not preoccupied with talk of militaristic solutions, but instead chronicles how innocent men, women, and children in Gaza, who want nothing to do with warfare, survive in a “war without distinct edges.” In this particular literary
geopolitical imagining, there is no focus on subterranean warfare, but, rather, the fear that comes from a different politics of verticality. In The Drones Eat with Me, the 51-day conflict is characterized more like a “weather event.” Saif explains how traumatized civilians spend their days walking down streets hoping not to attract the attention of drone crews flying overhead, and like meteorologists, those who want to survive have to make educated guesses about open-air patterns and daily conditions. Qualey (2015) eloquently explains this facet of the daily dingpolitis in Saif’s Book:

Although the Israeli soldier occasionally appears, the titular drone remains the central antagonist. The drone here is anthropomorphised: it eats, sleeps, drinks and gazes into Abu Saif’s living room. Occasionally, Abu Saif imagines the nameless and faceless Israeli soldier, but this soldier is always secondary to his drone. The Palestinians too become alienated from themselves. The video-game nature of distance warfare brings a new sort of dehumanisation. In the middle of the war, Abu Saif quotes from a conversation between nameless Gazans: “I spent that day running between shells like I was playing a video game. Like I was a character in the game, someone else was playing me.” (paras. 9–10)

While Israeli citizens worried daily about the next rocket attack from Gaza, their non-combatant counterparts in Gaza buried those who died from thanopological drone attacks.

If Israeli terror tunnel rhetorics only focused on the existential dangers posed by Palestinian infiltrators, this in itself would be problematic. But the problems are magnified when it is civilian populations, and not only rocket carriers, who are viewed as pesky contributors to infestation problems. This is where autoimmunity rhetorics are used to explain how the dispensation of a little inoculating violence by the Israelis can help cure Palestinian civilian pestilence.

**Autoimmunity: The Rhetorical Metamorphosis of Palestinian Civilians into Terrorist Targets**

While a few Israeli writers or critics of OPE commented on the exaggerated dangers associated with the tunnels, a growing number of pundits writing about the terror tunnels joined the ranks of those who acknowledged the need to target Palestinian civilian populations. For example, in late July of 2014, Elizabeth Tsurkov indicated on Twitter that she had spotted a sign that day on
Herzl Boulevard in Jerusalem that read: “There are No Innocents in Gaza” (Tsurkov, 2014, para. 1). Tsurkov was writing about some populist sentiments that were being expressed by those who supported OPE.

This type of ideographic cliché about the lack of innocents sadly represented the typical sentiments found in complex public and elite media tropes that circulated in countless mainstream and alternative venues both during and after OPE. Few of these commentators reflected on how Hamas operatives could use similar operative logics to claim that all Israelis, because of their conscription, were targets, or that some of the military facilities that served as the homes for bombers, drones, artillery, or other machinery were placed near Israeli populations. Did that mean that patriotic Israelis, who celebrated the presence of all of this weaponry, should be viewed as “participants” that negated the chance that they would be treated as non-combatants or civilians? The focus on the social agency of the Gazan populations who purportedly built tunnels or climbed to the roofs of their homes during Israel operations deflected attention away from the asymmetrical nature of all of this vilification of Palestinian populations.

As noted above, after the Second Intifada, this move toward expanding the number of potential social actors who could be viewed as deadly enemies has been complemented by some auxiliary militaristic and elite discourses that have commented on the prioritizing of Israeli lives, and this has called for a recalibration of the ways that decision-makers feel about what is called the “force protection” of Israel soldiers. For example, Asa Kasher (2014), who is often characterized as the “father” of contemporary Israeli military ethical theorizing, has argued that “no state has or should shoulder as much responsibility for the safety of enemy civilians as it does for its own people” (para. 7). These types of militaristic and legalistic distinctions help buttress the claims of those who argue that there are no civilians in Gaza.

In spite of Israeli claims that novel twenty-first century battlefield conditions and the discovery of “new” tunnels have required this move toward harshness, many of these Israeli epistemes contain the residual rhetorical fragments that could be found in early colonial and imperial rationales for the treatment of civilians and the enemy during other “emergencies.” Frédéric Mégret, who has used a postcolonial lens to review some of the antecedents of what he calls “international law’s ‘other,’” noted that during the nineteenth century, the British argued that they could use dum dum bullets because that was “ammunition more suitable to the conditions of savage warfare” (2005, p. 11). Heinrich von Treitschke, a German intellectual, once complained that if Kaiser Wilhelm’s Second Reich “applied international law” to what was
happening during the suppression of the Nama and Herero in German South West Africa, this would turn “international law” into mere “phrases” because it would not be “humanity or justice but shameful weakness” not to punish African tribes or burn villages (Mégret, 2005, p. 11).

Many antiquated colonial and imperial commentaries on the barbarity of the populations of the “other” have lingered in all sorts of military and legal archives to be picked by twenty-first century arguers who wish to deny international protections to certain civilian populations. Israeli talk of the primacy of “force protection” reapplies many of these colonial and postcolonial arguments that were once used to make distinctions between the barbaric “other” and the civilized colonials or imperialists.

In many ways, this focus on the supposed illegal behaviour of supportive Gazan populations who “participate” by failing to prevent the building of tunnels is also a part of the lingering debates that international communities have had about the protection of guerrillas and freedom fighters during anti-colonial struggles. Since at least the time of the passage of the 1977 Protocols to the Geneva Conventions extending some protections to those engaged in asymmetrical warfare, there have been those who have repudiated these efforts as an affront to efficacious “self-defense” counterterrorist efforts.

The existence of the tunnels beneath Gaza, which are configured as parts of massive webs that are used to hide those wishing to infiltrate Israel in unanticipated places, become entangled in these geopolitical and domestic debates about irregular warfighting, the rights of settlers to fight off “barbarians,” and what can or cannot be done during colonial or imperial “emergencies.” The post-World War II communities who once witnessed the horrors of a conflict that took tens of millions of lives willingly passed the Geneva Conventions and provided that extraordinary protection to civilians. However, during the twenty-first century, as the war against Fascism was replaced by the Global War on Terror, members of post-heroic ages work to erode some of the lines that were once drawn between the protection of civilians and the protection of warfighters.

To complicate matters for civilians, technological talk about the progress of anti-tunnelling research often circulates as clinical, objective scientific inquiry that masks the thanatopolitical nature of all of these securitization rhetorics. What we are actually witnessing is a form of what Gordon and Perugini (2016) call a “resignification of space” and a reconstitution of civilians that allow a powerful nation-state to “frame its violence post hoc in order to claim that this violence was utilized in accordance with international law” (p. 168). Using various forms of lawfare (politicized
law, see Dunlap, 2008) and warfare Israelis and other defenders of extra-territorial “counterterrorist” efforts can configure countless forms of political dissent in Gaza, or any attempts to circumvent sieges or blockades, as civilian acts that pose national security risks to Israelis and Israeli interests.

In Gazan contexts, universal and inherently polysemic and polyvalent terms such as “military necessity,” the laws of “distinction,” the rules of “proportionality,” and the scope of “humanity” are used in monolithic Israeli ways to vilify civilians who align themselves with Hamas. What are supposed to be IHL provisions that were passed to constrain the use of aggressive warfighting against defenceless civilians are reinterpreted to enable and embolden those who want to use massive “lethal force” against Gazan “infrastructural” targets. Mikko Joronen has written of how Israeli visual rhetorics and military textual materials are used to comment on the legality of “roof-knocking” techniques, and this has led to an “inversion of biopolitical subjects” who become the target objects of a “thanatopolitics of ethical killing during Operation Protective Edge” (Joronen, 2016, p. 1).

The existence of even one newly “discovered” terror tunnel anywhere in Gaza serves as the lynchpin for those who want to treat Gazans in the same way that Lebanese populations were treated when it was said they supported Hezbollah. Regardless of who gets bombed or shelled, the victims can always be blamed for their suffering. These types of rhetorical moves help explain why an individual like Major-General (res.) Giora Eiland, a popular Israeli commentator and military analyst, can explain to readers of Ynet.com why “there is no such thing as ‘innocent civilians.’” In an Op-Ed published near the end of OPE, Eiland opined that Israelis needed to do more than simply take out some terrorist tunnels in Gaza. Given the fact that Hamas had not forcibly occupied the Gaza Strip, Israelis needed to be willing to accept the fact that Hamas was the “authentic representative” of Palestinian populations and that these were “cruel people” (Eiland, 2014, paras. 8–10).

How did the descendants of those who survived the fighting in places like Lotz or the Warsaw Ghetto or the forests of the Ukraine—who needed tunnels and subterranean warfare during the Holocaust—come to believe that Hamas represents some unique dangers for Eretz Israel?

Some of the most popular of the Israeli pro-military ideographic or visual media frames that were deployed during and after OPE sutured together discursive information about the tunnels with commentaries about the individual and communal decisions that have been made by Gazan populations. In their vocal defence of Israel’s use of targeted assassinations, blockades, drone attacks, massive military barrages, and aerial targeting of Gazan
“infrastructures,” pro-Israeli advocates focus attention on the voluntary nature of Palestinian decision-making that ensures that they will not be treated as innocent non-combatants injured in the fog of war. Eiland, writing for moderate and conservative Israeli readers of Ynet, opined that the Israeli dispersal of violence during OPE had been too restrained. His situational awareness led him to argue that the Israeli military had been hindered when they were forced to try to discriminate between “good” Gazan citizens and “bad” supporters of Hamas. Echoing Sharon’s (2012) claims, and writing in early August of 2014, Eiland (by then a Major-General in the Israel reserves) explained that it was “absurd” to fight an enemy with “one hand” while providing that same enemy with food and energy with the “other hand” (Eiland, 2014).

From a diplomatic vantage point, the older negotiating rhetorics that were produced by post-Nakba Israeli speakers who argued that there were “no Palestinian” people have now morphed into twenty-first century claims that there are “no civilians” in Gaza. It could plausibly be averred that Israeli militarists and their supporters have participated in a necropolitics (Mbembe, 2003) of Gazan affairs that tallies the dead in ways that assume that some 1000 “terrorists” were killed during the latest incursion.

These autoimmunizing rhetorics are filled with contradictory explanations for how IDF or Israeli security forces see, or don’t see, what is happening in the tunnels. The IDF and Minister of Foreign Affairs websites, YouTube spaces, and other social media platforms often give the impression that they have a “God’s-eye” view of Gaza, where the excellence of Israeli systems of information gathering from informants, drones, or other forms of human and nonhuman surveillance provides them with an omnipresent, omnipotent, and omniscient view of what is happening from above, on the ground, and even below the ground during incursions like OPE. This type of nationalistic situational awareness—one that can only come from Israeli understandings of Palestinians and military threats—is characterized by academics as the “God trick,” which, in this particular instance, is used to explain why Israeli targeting during OPE was so precise and so protective of civilian lives.

However, other defences of OPE assume the blindness of the IDF and the invisibility of Hamas’s tunnelling activity in Gaza. This particular dispositif is composed from fragments that explains that the aerial war against Hamas was not enough, and that the vast subterranean network was hidden from the view of not only of the Israelis, but the UN special reporters or others who would focus attention on potential Israeli war crimes while ignoring the
existential dangers posed by tunnels that could be used to carry out the next catastrophe or “holocaust” that might be suffered by non-vigilant Israelis.

Magnifying the dangers of the terror tunnels after OPE not only hides the physical asymmetry and the massive destruction that was suffered by civilians who cannot be dismissed by the international community as “collateral damage.” Conversations about terror tunnel rhetorics also aids the cause of those who want to see moral equivalence created through the usage of a dingpolitik that juxtaposes Hamas missiles and tunnels with Israel F-16s, drones, tanks, artillery, and naval shelling. Forensic architectural talk about subterranean warfare augments the lawfare and hasbara (Israeli word for public diplomacy) that is circulated by everyone from Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to the sympathetic pro-Israeli student who fights against BDS movements on global campuses. Terror tunnels in Gaza, explains McGhie-Fraser (2015), “‘dig deep in the geopolitical imagination,’” and have “played a key role in re-establishing a blockaded economy, transporting goods, sparking fear and hope,” and “played a prominent role in the spike of conflicts centering in Gaza in 2014” (para. 1).

This mass-mediated homogenization of all Gazans as supporters of Hamas and builders of tunnels blurs the lines between civilians and military targets, or supporters of the Gazan regime and the refugees living on the Gaza Strip. Once again, “the transformation of Palestinian physical space” is used in thick dispositifs that lead “to the disappearance of Palestine’s human landscape” (Bardi, 2016, p. 171). It does not help matters when we realize that in the wake of OPE, many of Netanyahu’s critics on the Far Right of the Israeli political spectrum have accused the Israeli Prime Minister of underestimating the magnitude of the terrorist threats that were posed by the “infiltration” tunnels as they demand that even more drastic action be taken during the next “mowing of the grass” in Gaza.

All of this scopic tunnel regime serves a host of diverse realpolitik Israeli interests. First, it deflects attention away from any calculus of risk and violence that would compare and contrast the deaths of 3 Israeli civilians during OPE with the deaths of thousands of Palestinian women and children. Second, by refusing to differentiate between the activities of the military wing of the Hamas regime and all of the civilians living on the Gaza Strip, the Israeli military foregrounds the morality of prioritizing the “force protection” of their own troops. As Judith Butler explained during her talk at the London School of Economics (LSE) in 2015, a “figurative operation” or “transposition” was taking place here, which allowed rhetors to act as if “those populations are effectively figured as part of weaponry,” so that individuals like Prime Minister
Netanyahu could complain about how Palestinians in Gaza where using their “telegenically dead” to mislead world communities about the realities of the situation (Butler, 2014, p. 239).

Conclusion

If Butler (2009) is right when she argues that select interpretive frames help audiences to decide who lives a life in luxury and who lives precariously, then have we reached a situation where much of the cosmopolitan world outside of Israel complains about the immunizing occupation of Gaza by Israelis, but yet does little to stop any of this? While they apply their vaunted principles of “international humanitarian law” in idealistic texts that comment on the illegality of the bombings of places such as Rafah, international cosmopolitans also seem to have accepted the facticity of the visualities that are circulated by Netanyahu, the IDF, and the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which treat incursions into Gaza as if they were in some symmetrical “war”; constant probabilistic talk of what might come of out Palestinian “terror tunnels” is used to deflect attention away from what is happening in the occupied West Bank as the spread of Israeli settlements signals the “recovery” of “Judea” and “Samaria.”

Critical scholars have the unenviable task of illustrating how the terror tunnel rhetorics are merely the most recent examples of biopolitical and thanatopolitical rhetorics that can be used to justify the “mowing of the lawn,” and the bombing of civilians in Gaza. As I noted earlier, it makes it much easier on the conscience to think of targets of lethal attacks as “infrastructure,” a term that can be used by militarists and legal wordsmiths to rationalize all sorts of Dingpolitik and Realpolitik behaviour. Using commentary on the need to prioritize the protection of one’s own soldiers and one’s own people dates back to colonial moments when IHL provisions protected Europeans from the ravages of the “barbarians,” and all of this Israeli talk of being at the forefront of counterterrorist anti-tunnelling is just a way of trying to act illiberally while appearing to be a liberal, Zionist, democratic society. In the moral, military, and legal calculus that is used in debates about terror tunnels, even the slightest of risk to any Israeli is treated as something that warrants the destructions of thousands of Palestinians lives in places like Gaza.

Forgetting about the nationalistic choices involved and the rhetorical crafting of potent medicalizing and securitizing rhetorics in Gazan contexts becomes especially problematic when countless innocent lives are at stake. Mediating tropes that focus on metastasizing cancers and terror tunnels may
play well for domestic Israeli audiences, especially during election time, but these same discursive and visual fragments become recurring and sedimented media tropes that have afterlives. They can be recycled and picked up, mashed together with graphics from other incursions, and then refurbished for use in many transcontinental debates about the morality, legitimacy, and legality of current and future Israeli incursions into Gaza, the West Bank, or southern Lebanon. Note, for example, how both during and after OPE global audiences who read mainstream newspapers or who viewed YouTube or Facebook are now bombarded with weekly messages about how Hamas has thousands of Palestinian workers who labour away at the digging of tunnels, making it appear as though all of Gaza is nothing more than an infected Strip that is occupied by denizens who have lost the right to be called non-combatants or civilians. The evolutionary development of terror tunnel rhetorics, which incrementally added new layers to Israeli governmental apparatus and hasbara, spiked between 2014–2016—to the point where polls showing that many Israelis feel that hundreds of millions of shekels must be spent on anti-tunnel weaponry.

As Nietzsche, Foucault, and many other rhetoricians over the years have warned us, the march of some key perspectival metaphors and other tropes can become a part of empowering, hegemonic dispositifs, and this is the case when Israelis use talk of pestilence, cancer, and other thanatopolitical horrors to magnify threats in a host of intertextual commentaries about the “Hamas regime.” Conflicts that actually involve structural and material disagreements about the characterizations of “Biblical” lands, demographics, water rights, dispossession, and occupation and rights of return are masked as “subterranean” battles that might require the expenditure of vast amounts of time and money as pro-Israelis in America call for the passage of bilateral agreements between the US and Israel to help further immunize Israel from Palestinian “infiltrators.” This, consciously or unconsciously, recycles those old Nakba rationales for killing or deporting those who tried to “infiltrate” Israeli after the “War of Independence.”

All media tropes conceal as well as reveal, and in this particular rhetorical situation, Israelis can pick and choose when they want to argue about visibility or invisibility, omniscience or blindness, as they debate about how best to combat the Gazan leaders and publics that turned smuggling tunnels into “terror” tunnels. For example, there are times when Israelis have argued as if they could peer through the fog of war, as they claimed that they knew that they had killed at least 1000 terrorists during OPE, and their use of telegenic visualities is used to illustrate their tracking of the mosques, the schools, the UN shelters, NGO buildings, or other places that supposedly housed “human
shields” and Hamas rockets. At other times, when Israelis wanted to rationalize why tanks and soldiers had to invade Gaza, they used rhetorics that assumed that the IDF was blind, and needed to actually invade Gaza in order to take out some of the 32 tunnels that they allegedly discovered during OPE.

In many ways it could be argued that if we accepted the “truth effects” of all of this anti-tunnelling rhetoric there would still be a host of questions that are rarely asked by mainstream journalists as they parrot IDF claims. Is the loss of thousands of Palestinian lives in Gaza during the 2014 invasion really a legal and “proportional” way to look at the supposed military gain that came from destroying some 32 discovered tunnels during OPE? How did Israeli secret service agents or IDF representatives actually know that those who died in the rubble could be configured as “combatants” or “civilians”? Were they assuming that every male over a certain age belonged to the “Hamas regime”? How did they discern the motives of the populations that they assumed acted as human shields? How would Israeli purveyors of some of these tunnel infographs or infograms respond if Hamas argued that the presence of any weapons in the homes of settlers or civilians in places like Tel Aviv transformed them into non-combatant enemies living in targetable “infrastructures”? What media tropes have appeared that put on display the placement of Israeli air bases, “Iron Dome” installations, naval weaponry, etc. in relation to dense population centers? Why just focus on the alleged social agency of “Hamas”?

All lives are precious, including Israeli lives, and all of this talk of targeting Gazan civilians takes us very far indeed from both the letter and the spirit of the post-War II Geneva Conventions and the 1977 Protocols.

Sadly, the amount of energy that is expended through writing and talking about terror tunnels signals the deflection of attention away from the real structural and material causes of much of this disputation. These are really disputes about expansionism, water, land, demographics, and ethnic hierarchies, but they are hidden by a militaristic discourse that can praise the subservience of Fatah on the West Bank while vilifying the tunnel builders who pay taxes to Hamas. This lack of both Israeli and international interest in non-military ways of viewing regional geopolitics and the economies of dispossession is reflected in the transmogrification of the older “smuggling” tunnels into catastrophic “terror tunnels.”

Before the Second Intifada when most Israelis, Palestinians, and outside observers debated about the “Arab-Israeli” conflict, talk of peaceful negotiations, the duties of belligerent occupiers, the status of a divided Jerusalem, two-state solutions, and preserving the “Green line” West of the
Jordan River, filled the geographic imaginaries of countless transcontinental ideological figurations. Yet since the end of the twentieth century, securitization rhetorics produced by militarist Israelis have become more polarizing, and those who want to avoid peacekeeping, or those who disdain land for peace agreements, are always in a rush to invent or discover the next existential threat that has to be dealt with by the “most moral army” in the world.

Militarizing the smuggling tunnels seems to make perfect sense when all facets of Palestinian/Israeli landscapes, including the West Bank and Jerusalem, have become weaponized, fashioned into sources of what Israelis call “friction.” Moreover, instead of admitting that blockades have hindered the development of a Gaza that might become a viable Palestinian entity, Israelis complain about how Gazan populations build tunnels instead of shelters, and this in turn means that destruction in the Gaza Strip becomes a symbol and point of condensation for representing Palestinian economic, political, social, and legal failures. The sentiments expressed by Eiland and Sharon that were noted above may sadly represent the mainstream of Israeli rhetorical cultures that have little faith in the Palestinian Authority or UN peacekeeping. Here there is no place for organizations like Breaking the Silence, which have been accused of traitorous conduct by pointing out lax rules of engagement that contributed to the horrors of OPE.

For many who believe that combating terrorism is a military science, the phrase “mowing the lawn” may appear to be a relatively harmless, and accurate, way of describing the war of attrition that might exist between Israel and Hamas or Israel and Hezbollah. However, when this terminology is used in anti-tunnel contexts these figurations put on display the problematic nature of

---

5 At one time there were even a few post-Zionist historiographers and others who held out hope that in our post-Oslo world we could find peaceful resolutions to our debates about the status of Jerusalem or the West Bank and the militarization of Gaza, but after the Second Intifada the dominant media tropes that circulated in mainstream and alternative outlets provided readers and viewers with increasingly polarizing ways of configuring this violence. While a growing number of international liberals, cosmopolitans, peace activists, and even sympathetic Israelis join BDS movements and call for the end to the Israeli blockade of Gaza, Israelis in turn respond with their own hasbara. They contend that a perfect storm of anti-Semitism, misunderstandings about Hamas, and the non-recognition of their Biblical rights to Palestinian lands has contributed to the attempted “delegitimation” of their democratic, Zionist state. Sadly, instead of finding constructive ways of co-producing one-state or two-state solutions that might allow for the growth of two different, and equal, ethnic and religious communities on neighbouring lands most of the world is often forced to make choices regarding what Weizman (2012) once characterized as the “lesser” of evils.
these discursive indigeneity contests. Post-OPE newspaper articles, journals, and books still use metaphoric clusters that imply that those who really care about situational awareness in Gaza should keep in mind, and accept, the empiricism behind all of this talk of the insecticides and pesticides that are needed to keep a lawn free of unwanted weeds and other undesirable pests. Imagine how many Israelis must have pictures of Israeli beaches, tourist destinations, peaceful settlements, and the protection of Hebron in their minds as they contrast these images with the lives of the Gazans who live under “the Hamas regime.”

Talk of terror tunnels also serves as a projection device that can be used by Israelis who are interested in the promotion and circulation of a unique, Israeli type of what Roger Stahl (2009) has called militainment. “Progress reports” are circulated by journalists on a nearly weekly basis in both mainstream and alternative press outlets about the efforts of the IDF and the Egyptians as they discover, blow-up, or flood the newly discovered terror tunnels in our post-heroic tunnelling age. This blending of entertainment, Israeli pride in technological prowess, and the assuaging of fears and guilt becomes a part of a dangerous biopolitical mix of rhetorical fragments that can be used by those who wish to show they are security experts or sales personnel who can help guard Israel. They can form alliances with those who want to see the constant funding of expensive anti-tunnelling devices that in turn helps show the world that Israeli drones and anti-missile defence systems are not the only marketable exports that are leaving Israeli shores. The systematic, incremental, methodical, and episodic nature of terrorizing surveillant control of Gazan tunnels thus serves the interests of former Israeli Majors and Generals who can become security consultants on corporate boards that are working around the clock to prevent future tunnel infiltration.

In some cases, talk of “mowing the lawn” is used in perspectival frameworks to complain about the alleged “soft” treatment of Palestinian enemies! For example, Martin Sherman has explicitly claimed that “mowing the lawn” strategies have not worked. “The grass needs to be uprooted,” once and for all, Sherman (2014) averred, and the only “durable solution requires dismantling Gaza, humanitarian relocation of the non-belligerent Arab

---

6 By “indigeneity” I am referring to the discursive contests that take place between Israelis and Palestinians during heated exchanges about the historiography of Palestine. While Israelis claim that they were given the land by God and have been continuously living in Judea and Samaria since the time of Abraham, puzzled Palestinian Arabs claim that they are actually the indigenous ethnic communities who have been living on this same land for centuries. Indigeneity wars take place as history books, archaeology, geography, and other terrains become the spaces and places of these heated exchanges.
population, and extension of Israeli sovereignty over the region” (paras. 35–36). Many more Israelis are willing to accept the need to recover the West Bank and the Google mapping of “Judea” and “Samaria,” but there are those who point to the tunnels and OPE as they invite readers to undo Ariel Sharon’s work and recapture Gaza. Given this type of rhetoric, one can readily see why some Palestinian intellectuals view the 1948 dispossession, which saw the migration of more than 700,000 Palestinians who “fled” Palestine, as just one small part of a continual Nakba.

These are not concerns that ended with the conclusion of the 51-day OPE. Israeli and American think-tanks continue, in 2017, to fill mainstream newspapers and the blogosphere with commentary on how best to fight the allegedly “new” tunnel wars that cannot be waged successfully by mollycoddling civilian populations. It is no coincidence that after Operation Protect Edge politicians like Netanyahu can continue to appeal to voters by recycling some of his 2013–2014 commentaries on the dangers of rockets that might hit Israeli kindergarteners near Gaza. Nor is it happenstance that talk of terror tunnels appears in articles about defending illegal West Bank settlements, where any actual removal of these structures can be characterized as “ethnic cleansing.”

The magnification of terror tunnel threats can also be used to counter the claims of Israeli critics who can be labelled as anti-Semitic or purveyors of discourses that are trying to “delegitimize” Israel. Some of these terror-tunnel infiltration metanarratives appear in mediascapes that are intended for domestic Israeli consumption, but these same perspectival tales can be used by those interested in the promotion of hasbara to refute misguided foreign views of Gaza. This type of rhetorical posturing is intended for international media consumers to blunt the persuasive power of organizations such as B’Tselem, Breaking the Silence, Amnesty International, or UN committees who complain about OPE practices, occupation, or the disproportionate use of violence by Israeli in Gaza. Configuring anti-Israeli diatribes as myopic blunts the persuasive power of those who contend that Gazan incursions have led to a culture of impunity.

If I am right, then media critics and others will observe in the near future how young Israeli and American military authors will become a part of a cottage industry that churns out reports, law reviews, journal articles, theses, and dissertations on how best to counter the existential threats posed by Gazan terror tunnels. The old heroic, Geneva Convention discussions that assumed that all civilians needed protection will give way to post-heroic commentaries on how non-combatants around the world have lost these protections when
they help build underground networks in subterranean realms. Civilian protections for the “enemy” other in many other contexts will give way as aesthetic media tropes are produced that will now take for granted that one’s own soldiers and civilian populations have no choice but to recognize that the Israelis were on to something when they averred that there were “no innocents” in Gaza.
References


Gordon, N., & Perugini, N. (2016). The politics of human shielding: on the resignification of space and the constitution of civilians as shields in


