

JPS Responds to Israel's Prime Minister

Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu during a press conference on 6 August 2014 cited the *Journal of Palestine Studies* (JPS) as the authoritative source documenting the claim that Hamas puts children to work in “terror” tunnels, sending them to their death. This naked fabrication has been repeated by numerous pro-Israeli media outlets, starting initially with a July 2014 article in the *Tablet* and reproduced subsequently in the *Jerusalem Post*, *Times of Israel*, and the *Huffington Post*.

In question is a summer 2012 JPS article by Nicolas Pelham entitled “Gaza’s Tunnel Phenomenon: The Unintended Dynamics of Israel’s Siege.” Pelham is a respected British journalist who has written on Gaza and broader Arab affairs for outlets such as the *Economist* and *New York Review of Books* for nearly a decade. The tunnels referred to in his article were the *commercial tunnels to Egypt* that were Gaza’s response to Israel’s imposition of a draconian blockade that rations almost all goods entering the territory, from construction materials, gasoline, and medicines, down to such items as pasta.

The article, perhaps the most comprehensive available on the tunnel economy, makes very clear that these tunnels were overwhelmingly private enterprises. Pelham’s argument is that Hamas, as the governing authority, *should* have regulated these private enterprises to prevent the use of child labor, but did not. Pelham never suggests, as the prime minister implied in his comments, that children were used to build *tunnels into Israel*. Certainly it would be surprising if Hamas entrusted its best kept military secret to children.

JPS must, however, admit to an unfortunate error in the article as it appeared, regarding **the figure of 160 children allegedly killed in commercial tunnels**. “At least 160 children have been killed in the tunnels, according to Hamas officials” is the sentence at issue. While, the *total* number of tunnel deaths recorded by the Hamas authorities as of 2012 was indeed 160, the qualifier “children” was inadvertently introduced by JPS at a late stage of editing. In fact, in January 2013, al-Mezan Center for Human Rights in Gaza put the total number of Palestinians killed in the commercial tunnels at 235, of whom 9 were children. Al-Mezan also noted that by then, another 20 Palestinians had been killed inside commercial tunnels as a result of Israeli air strikes. We accept responsibility for this error and apologize for it.

Netanyahu’s meretricious concern for Palestinian children is a callous and transparent attempt to draw attention away from his war crimes against a besieged and trapped refugee population with no ability to escape or protect itself against Israel’s blanket bombing which reduced “entire neighborhoods to rubble” (*New York Times*, 20 August 2014). As at this writing, the Israeli assault had led to the deaths of more than 2,000 Gazans and the maiming of more than 10,000 others, overwhelmingly civilians. Of the fatalities, more than 541 were children and 250 women (combined 39 percent of all fatalities). Of the wounded, some 3,084 were children and 1970 women (combined 49 percent of all injured). These statistics are courtesy of the PLO Negotiations Affairs Division as of 18 August 2014 (<http://nad-plo.org/userfiles/file/InfoGraphics/GazaUnder>

Attack_18Aug.jpg), but readers should note that fatalities continue to rise as the injured die, as more bodies are uncovered from the rubble, and as Israeli attacks continue. Let there be no doubt, then, about the true source of threat to Palestinian children whether in Gaza, East Jerusalem or the West Bank. It is Israel—with its occupation, siege, and perpetual resort to overwhelming force against the very population for whose safety and wellbeing it is, as the occupying power, morally and legally responsible under international law.