Open Letter: The partisan approach to Gaza is a discredit to Canada

Canadians for Justice and Human Rights in Gaza

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Open letter to Prime Minister Harper, NDP Leader Thomas Mulcair, and Liberal Party Leader Justin Trudeau:

We, the undersigned academics, lawyers, and community leaders, are profoundly perturbed by the unbalanced and partisan position adopted by the Canadian government and federal political parties regarding the current violence in Gaza. While more than [650 Palestinians](http://www.aljazeera.com/humanrights/2014/07/un-investigate-israel-offensive-gaza-201472316293283952.html) – [75 per cent civilians](http://www.ochaopt.org/documents/ocha_opt_sitrep_23_07_2014.pdf), according to the United Nations – have been killed in Israel’s latest military operation, official statements have focused exclusively on denouncing Hamas’ rocket strikes (responsible for [two fatalities](http://www.aljazeera.com/humanrights/2014/07/un-investigate-israel-offensive-gaza-201472316293283952.html)) and uncritically proclaiming Israel’s right to self-defence.

While Hamas’ indiscriminate rocket firings are illegal under international law, Israel is still bound by basic international humanitarian law principles protecting civilians during times of war and [prohibiting collective punishment](http://www.icrc.org/ihl/com/380-600038). Indiscriminate and disproportionate attacks on civilian life and infrastructure in Gaza violate fundamental norms of international law. As of July 22, the toll of the ongoing offensive (the third major military assault on Gaza in six years) includes:

– at least [147 children killed](http://www.ochaopt.org/documents/ocha_opt_sitrep_23_07_2014.pdf), including [four by missile strike](http://reliefweb.int/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/occupied-palestinian-territory-gaza-emergency-situation-repo-6) while playing soccer on a Gaza beach; – [3 504 Palestinians injured](http://www.ochaopt.org/documents/ocha_opt_sitrep_23_07_2014.pdf) (it is uncertain how many are civilians, but the number includes 1 100 children and 1 153 women); – [2 655 families](http://www.ochaopt.org/documents/humanitarian_Snapshot_23July2014_oPt_V1.pdf) whose homes have been destroyed or severely damaged; – [117 000 people displaced](http://www.ochaopt.org/documents/ocha_opt_sitrep_23_07_2014.pdf); – at least [90 schools and 18 health facilities damaged](http://www.ochaopt.org/documents/humanitarian_Snapshot_23July2014_oPt_V1.pdf) (including the [destruction of al-Wafa Hospital](http://www.hrw.org/news/2014/07/22/gaza-airstrike-deaths-raise-concerns-ground-offensive), the only rehabilitation hospital in Gaza and the West Bank)

– [1.2 million people](http://www.ochaopt.org/documents/humanitarian_Snapshot_23July2014_oPt_V1.pdf) with no or very limited access to water and sanitation services.

And the toll increases by the hour.

Multiple human rights groups have documented and condemned likely Israeli war crimes in Gaza. United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay [concluded](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jul/11/israeli-air-strikes-gaza-continue-us-barack-obama-offers-broker-ceasefire) two weeks ago that “Deeply disturbing reports that many of the civilian casualties, including of children, occurred as a result of strikes on homes . . . raise serious doubt about whether the Israeli strikes have been in accordance with international humanitarian law and international human rights law.” This week, Ms. Pillay [confirmed](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-28437626): “There seems to be a strong possibility that international law has been violated [by Israel’s military actions in the Gaza Strip], in a manner that could amount to war crimes.”

Amnesty International’s report [observed](http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/israelgaza-un-must-impose-arms-embargo-and-mandate-international-investigation-civilian-death-t), “In several cases of [air strikes on civilian homes in Gaza], no evidence has emerged to indicate that the alleged ‘Hamas operatives’ were inside the homes at the time of the attack, that the homes were being used to store munitions, or otherwise being used for military purposes.” [According to Philip Luther](http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/israelgaza-un-must-impose-arms-embargo-and-mandate-international-investigation-civilian-death-t), director of Amnesty’s Middle East and North Africa Program: “Unless the Israeli authorities can provide specific information to show how a home is being used to make an effective contribution to military actions, deliberately attacking civilian homes constitutes a war crime and also amounts to collective punishment against the families.”

Human Rights Watch [similarly found](http://www.hrw.org/news/2014/07/15/israelpalestine-unlawful-israeli-airstrikes-kill-civilians) that “Israeli air attacks . . . have been targeting apparent civilian structures and killing civilians in violation of the laws of war.”

The disregard for international law conveyed by the government’s silence on such potentially grave violations committed by Israel discredits Canada domestically and internationally. Moreover, adoption of such a one-sided position subverts Canada’s own official foreign policy goal of achieving a “comprehensive, just and lasting peace settlement” between Israel and Palestine. Rather than maintaining a studious silence in the face of these documented violations of international humanitarian law, a true friend would act responsibly and call Israel to account for those violations.

As a country claiming to champion universal human rights and dignity, Canada’s foreign policy must align with international law, and reflect the equal value of Palestinian and Israeli life. The callous devaluation of Palestinian life communicated by our political leaders does not represent us as Canadians.

Sincerely,

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