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Another Look: Medical Cooperation and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Danielle Masor

The Controversy

There has been much debate and controversy surrounding the war in Gaza of last year (December 28 2008- January 18, 2009), and it is often portrayed in a slanted, if not biased, manner. Indeed, I came across one such article in last year's issue of *Quill and Scope* entitled "The Humanitarian Crisis in Gaza: A look at the health infrastructure before, during and immediately after the December-January attacks." The article described the affects of last year's conflict on Gaza's health care infrastructure and the health of its population. However, while doing so, it presented a highly politicized and biased view of the conflict, and critical facts about the events in Gaza were omitted.

Critical Facts

I would like to establish some key facts about the Gaza conflict that were not mentioned in last year's article. Then, I hope to focus on a more uplifting aspect of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: Israel's medical aid to its Palestinian neighbors and the world beyond.

In terms of critical facts, the article did not mention what precipitated the war in Gaza; it made no mention that Palestinians have fired over 12,000 rockets at southern Israel over the past eight years, terrorizing towns closest to Gaza, such as Sderot.^{1,2} Over 90 percent of Sderot residents have experienced a Palestinian Kassam explosion at some point.³ Over one million Israelis live within firing range of these deadly "homemade" rockets that are stuffed with shrapnel and nails to inflict the maximum damage possible.⁴ An entire generation of children in Sderot has grown up with the fear of constant rocket attacks. Thus, in order to protect its own citizens, Israel had no choice but to engage Gaza and root out its vast terrorist infrastructure.

Moreover, while discussing the high death toll and injury rate in Gaza, the article omitted the fact that Hamas, the internationally recognized terrorist organization that runs Gaza, makes widespread use of human shields. Whereas the Israeli population hides in underground shelters when there is warning of a rocket attack, the authorities in Gaza have been known to hide guns in schools, mosques, or hospitals, and use human shields to protect themselves.⁵ Alan Dershowitz, a professor at Harvard Law School, succinctly summarized the situation, "This is the Hamas dual strategy: to kill and injure as many Israeli civilians as possible by firing rockets indiscriminately at Israeli civilian targets, and to provoke Israel to kill as many Palestinian civilians as possible to garner world sympathy."⁶ In fact, the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) went to great lengths to avoid civilian casualties. The IDF announced exactly where it would strike with radio broadcasts, over two million leaflets, over 100,000 cell phone calls, and specific warnings before attacks.^{8,9}

In conclusion, the Gaza conflict is complex, and it is part of a broader Israeli-Palestinian conflict that is exquisitely complicated and multi-dimensional. Moving beyond the Gaza conflict, now, I would like to show that there is more than strife between Israelis and Palestinians. Turning to the medical arena, I hope to show how Israel's advanced medical system has bene-

fited its Palestinian neighbors, and how Israeli non-profit ventures have saved the lives of many Palestinians and others.

The Reality

Israel's involvement in the administration of health care to Palestinians began over forty years ago. In 1967, Israel was attacked by its neighbors and after winning this brief, Six-Day War, Israel assumed control of the Golan Heights, West Bank and Gaza. Interestingly, it also assumed responsibility of the health of the Palestinians. As Dr. Theo Dov Golan, former Director General of Israel's Ministry of Health notes, "During that period (1967-1994), Israel has presented annually dramatic documented achievements to the World Health Organization (WHO)... This included the total eradication in the Palestinian population of poliomyelitis, neonatal-tetanus and measles. Also, Israel dramatically reduced the death rate of Palestinian newborns from over 60/1000 to 19/1000 within those 27 years of Israel's presence."⁹

To this very day, thousands of Palestinians are referred to Israeli hospitals for life-saving treatment. The Israel-based NGO, the Peres Center for Peace, has established the "Saving Children" project, facilitating referrals to and treatment of Palestinian infants and children in Israeli hospitals for sophisticated treatments and diagnostic procedures not available in the West Bank or Gaza. The costs are covered entirely by the Peres Center (which receives funding from private sources—including several regional Italian governments). Since its inception in 2003, "Saving Children" has received some 6,560 referrals from the West Bank and Gaza.¹⁰

Outside the NGO circuit, Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza are referred to several hospitals in Israel. Before the Gaza conflict, for example, Barzilai hospital, located only twelve miles from Gaza, received numerous Palestinian patients on a daily basis. As Dr. Ron Lobel, Barzilai's deputy director noted in a 2008 interview: "We treat hundreds of Gazans here each year... Even if they're terrorists, they're treated like any other person being brought into the emergency room - we make no distinction between treating Israelis or Palestinians." While the Palestinian Authority's Health Department pays for a majority of the cases, Israel foots the bill for many others. Of course, it gets complicated, and many Gazans are stopped at the Erez security crossing before they can access Israeli health care. In 2004, a female suicide bomber who claimed she had surgical plates in her legs blew herself up at the crossing after bypassing the metal detector, killing four Israelis, prompting increased security measures.^{11,12}

Save A Child's Heart (SACH)

Perhaps the most uplifting of all the examples of the medical relationship between Israelis and Palestinians, is the Israeli-based humanitarian organization, Save a Child's Heart (SACH), which was founded in 1995 by Dr. Ami Cohen. The goal of SACH is to provide and improve pediatric cardiac care for children from developing countries regardless of nationality, religion, color, gender or financial situation. To date, over 2,100 children (49% from the West Bank, Gaza, Iraq and Jordan, 40% from Africa, 7% from China, Sri Lanka, and Vietnam, and 4% from Moldova and Russia), ranging from early infancy to 18 years of age, have been successfully treated.¹³ Their cases include numerous congenital heart defects, such as tetralogy of Fallot, and acquired conditions, such as rheumatic heart disease.

SACH medical personnel travel throughout the Middle East, Africa, and beyond to evaluate potential patients with portable echocardiography technology and the cooperation of local cardiologists. If it is decided that an operation is necessary, SACH flies the child (and a family member, for younger children) to Israel for treatment. Surgery is performed at the Wolfson Center in Holon, Israel, not far from Tel Aviv. Children are hosted pre- and post-operatively at the nearby Children's Home. SACH also runs teaching missions, sharing knowledge and expertise with colleagues in China, Ethiopia, and Mauritania, to name just a few. A total of 14 such teaching missions have been conducted to date. Moreover, SACH conducts training programs to foster more independent centers of competence in the developing world, and 50 visiting physicians have been trained under its auspices.¹⁴

SACH is funded by private donors, including Christian charities, and its remarkable 70-person staff, including its chief surgeon, contribute their time without receiving any payment from SACH.

What I find so uplifting about SACH is that it operates without regard to politics. SACH gives its all to save the life of any child—whether he or she is Palestinian or Iraqi. One particularly touching story, which emerged against the context of the war in Gaza, detailed how a little Palestinian girl, Noor, and her mother, Wafaa Huseini, managed to get out of Gaza and make it to the Wolfson Center for surgical correction of a debilitating patency between Noor's right and left ventricles. The eleven person medical team included Jews, Christians, and Muslims. It didn't matter what was going on in the world outside, all that mattered was saving Noor's life.

I spent some time looking at the on-line photo gallery of children presently at the SACH Children's Home either awaiting or recovering from heart surgery.¹⁶ Yuquing, 13, is from China. Kinsley, 3.5 years, and Erica, age 5, are from Ghana. Hezhan and Rezhna, both smiling very broadly in their photos, are from Iraq. Salam, 9 months, is from the West Bank. Daria is Romanian, and Aisha, grinning to ear-to-ear, is from Zanzibar. These pictures concisely convey the humanitarian efforts of Israelis, and stand in sharp contrast to the often politicized, one-sided criticism of this small nation.

Further research led me to similar ventures. Eye From Zion, for instance, is an Israel-based non-profit working to restore sight to hundreds throughout the developing world, mostly with the relatively simple removal of cataracts.¹⁷ The Midwives Coexistence Project is a group of Palestinian and Israeli midwives who work together toward peace to assist pregnant Israeli and Palestinian mothers with safe and natural births.¹⁸

In conclusion, it is easy to simplify the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and ignore the complex, subtle reality on the ground, of which Israeli-Palestinian medical involvement is but one dimension. It is also easy to forget that Israel is a nation of only 7.2 million people, with a landmass the size of New Jersey. Despite its small populace, and vast security concerns, it remains the only democracy in the Middle East. And despite its small size, it sent one of the biggest international aid teams, 220 strong, to Haiti in the wake of the recent earthquake that claimed an estimated 200,000 to 250,000 lives. Israel set up a huge, makeshift hospital which could accommodate up to 500 people, and included an operating room for complex surgeries.^{19,20} Several Haitian children were born in the Israeli hospital. The first mother to deliver there told the doctor, Dr. Shir Dar, that she would name her son Israel.^{20,21}

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