

OPINION

Gaza attack on media offices will deepen fog of war



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In times of conflict, the way the parties conduct themselves is a good indicator of their values and principles. So it is with the current crisis between the Palestinians and Israelis, and in particular, the latest attacks on the media based in the Gaza Strip.

On Saturday, an Israeli air strike destroyed an 11-storey apartment building used by local and international media companies, including the Associated Press news agency and Al Jazeera, my former employer. It followed similar strikes on Tuesday and Wednesday targeting high-rise residential buildings that foreign and local journalists also used as offices.



A ball of fire erupts from the media building in Gaza City after an Israeli airstrike.

In a Twitter thread, the Israeli Defence Forces said they brought the towers down because Hamas uses tall buildings in Gaza “for multiple military purposes such as intelligence gathering, planning attacks, command and control, and communications”.

The media companies say they have seen no evidence to support the IDF’s claims, either as long-term occupants who knew the buildings and their residents well, or through anything the Israelis have offered. But let’s suppose for a moment that the claims are true. (And Hamas has long been accused of hiding military facilities in civilian areas.)

Israel often presents itself as being “the only democracy in the Middle East”, with guarantees of freedom of expression, including press freedom, written into its constitution. But that is meaningless if it only applies to the press within Israel’s formal borders.

Long before the Israeli bombings, Hamas and Fatah – the two Palestinian movements that dominate the Occupied Territories – have made life tough for reporters. In its latest World Press Freedom report, the Paris-based Reporters Without Borders said journalists based in the territories routinely face from Hamas and Fatah “threats, heavy-handed interrogation, arrest without charge, intimidatory lawsuits and prosecutions, and bans on covering certain events”.



A policeman stands on the rubble of the media building destroyed by an Israeli airstrike.

The latest Israeli air strikes attacking the media, destroying their offices and hampering their work, further reduce our understanding of what is taking place inside the Gaza Strip at a time when accurate information is more important than ever. It

increases the chances that rumour, misinformation and propaganda will influence the unfolding crisis. It deepens the “fog of war”.

As the AP president and chief executive, Gary Pruitt, said in a statement, “the world will know less about what is happening in Gaza because of what happened today.”

If Israel truly believes its actions in Gaza against Hamas are justified, proportionate and reasonable, at the very least it needs to provide safe and secure alternative premises within the Gaza Strip for the media companies whose facilities have been destroyed. Anything less will be seen by the international community as an attack on press freedom itself and the values Israel claims to hold dear.

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