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Palestinians protesting in Gaza recently, demanding an end to Israeli sonic booms. Reuters

Last update - 10:20 06/11/2005

Demons in the skies of the Gaza Strip

By [Gideon Levy](#)

This word does not appear in the Hebrew dictionary, but an old-new weapon from the sophisticated arsenal directed against the Palestinian people has again suddenly emerged. While not deadly, it is fiendish: the sonic boom.

The world's best air force is amusing itself by creating fear in a helpless and terrified civilian population. Twenty-nine such booms were sounded during a period of four days in September, and this practice was repeated again recently, according to Physicians for Human Rights-Israel and the Gaza Community Mental Health Program, which jointly submitted a High Court petition on this matter. If there is such a thing as an unequivocal case of collective punishment, then this is it.

Parents in Gaza speak about the fears their children have suffered in recent weeks, the nightmares and bed-wetting. Husbands tell about pregnant women who have experienced panic attacks. The windowpanes in homes shatter one after another. Here is a scoop: Palestinians can also be "trauma victims."

These booms, whose only purpose is to sow fear among innocent civilians, have been added to the artillery shells pounding the Gaza Strip and the daily barrage of liquidation missiles, which indiscriminately kill armed militants and innocent people. The fact that the air force is employing this weapon mainly late at night, or early in the morning, when masses of pupils are making their way to school, only makes its wickedness more conspicuous. Israel may have disengaged from Gaza, but its air force has not.

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It is true, the liquidations and shelling are much worse. But the thinking behind

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Responses: 133

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19:34 Panel dealing with gov't corruption to confront reduced list of issues

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the use of sonic booms is no less chilling: Israel has stuck with its old and bad policy that believes in "searing the consciousness" of the entire population so that it will pressure perpetrators of terrorist acts to stop their activity. The end result is generally the opposite; the cruel means of collective punishment serves to encourage terror more than prevent it.

But the method's ineffectiveness is not its only disadvantage. An air force that orders its pilots to generate a large noise only to sow fear among civilians is an air force with a moral flaw. While a pilot who fires a missile at a busy street, or drops a bomb on an apartment house, can still, barely, find some dubious justification for his action, what goes through the mind of a young pilot who sets out on a mission whose only aim is mass, indiscriminate intimidation? Does he envision the children who awaken in fear because of him? Does he consider the nightmares that plague them? Can he imagine his little brothers awakening in alarm in the middle of the night at the sound of the boom? Does he recall the panic that struck many homes in the Sharon area last week after a series of mysterious booms? Does he know that the commander of the air force in 2001 issued an explicit directive to avoid crossing the sound barrier on flights over populated areas in Israel due to "the tension this phenomenon creates among the residents," as reported in Issue 139 of the Air Force Journal? A complete squadron was grounded then because of a series of booms. The air force commander who forbade his troops from generating this noise is today the chief of staff and is ordering them to sound these booms.

The Palestinians are not the first victims of this method. In 1969, two Phantoms were sent to sow fear in the skies of Cairo. A year later, Phantoms from the Patishim ("Hammers") squadron did this in the skies of Damascus. This is how a bully demonstrates his strength. Over the years, we also used this method in the skies of Lebanon. But our enemies have never known the type of wholesale booms like those of recent weeks in Gaza. Anyone who has never awakened in a house full of children and infants at the sound of this thunder cannot understand how frightening it is. I once heard a boom like this over the Jenin refugee camp, and I was unable to breathe for a moment. And it is particularly frightening during periods of tension: When missiles are fired upon the streets of Gaza every day, nerves are shaky in any case.

Such is life in "liberated" Gaza: The conditions of incarceration are even more difficult than before the disengagement. There is a complete blockade in effect that includes the sick, students, workers, everyone; and there are the daily liquidations and sonic booms. True, Qassam rockets also are very frightening, but does one cruel method justify another? Do the booms prevent the Qassams? Or are they only intended to provoke and punish a population whose majority already opposes the Qassams?

The High Court now faces another opportunity to express its view on the system of collective punishment Israel employs against the Palestinians. One fears that the justices will again evade their responsibility this time. After all, they are still weighing, for years, the question of the legality of the liquidations.



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- | | | | |
|-----|---|--------------------|----------|
| 1. | gideon haas ---"creating fear in a terrified population" | 10:36 fagin | 06/11/05 |
| 2. | ben gurion | 11:00 fagin | 06/11/05 |
| 3. | gideon haas and his cartoon depictions of israel | 11:07 fagin | 06/11/05 |
| 4. | gideon haas"but our enemies have never known" | 11:10 fagin | 06/11/05 |
| 5. | #1 Fagin | 11:32 Simon | 06/11/05 |
| 6. | Sonic booms a justified warning | 11:44 Marc Hamil | 06/11/05 |
| 7. | The best of bad alternatives | 11:45 Yonatan | 06/11/05 |
| 8. | The same old Fagin | 11:50 THE PRINCE | 06/11/05 |
| 9. | The pilots enjoy terrorizing children | 11:53 American | 06/11/05 |
| 10. | Gideon Levy and the sonic booms | 12:18 Yojanan | 06/11/05 |
| 11. | what should israel do,mrs gideon | 12:26 e.m | 06/11/05 |

haas		
12.	Gideon Levy is right about one thing	12:46 Stephen Duke 06/11/05
13.	Booms?	12:52 Ezreal 06/11/05
14.	Gideon	12:55 Steven 06/11/05
15.	imagin for one second	13:12 salam 06/11/05
16.	Sonic Booms	13:32 BM 06/11/05
17.	9 heroic american apologists	13:33 BM 06/11/05
18.	I don` t agree	13:36 Delta 06/11/05
19.	Re: Levy and the Demons	13:57 Omid the Persian 06/11/05
20.	Kassams and sonic booms	13:57 Leon Rosgarten 06/11/05
21.	anything goes	14:01 Rose 06/11/05
22.	One for Mr Levy	14:01 Gerrit 06/11/05
23.	The New Joshuas	14:03 The Other Alan 06/11/05
24.	Diamond Skies	14:05 Bertrand Barnett 06/11/05
25.	Demons in the skies	14:05 Paul C 06/11/05
26.	Prince likes his stereotypes #8	14:17 Ezreal 06/11/05
27.	But Israel isn` t firing on Iran (#15)	14:26 Yohanon Emek 06/11/05
28.	Justice has been served :) Poor JDL!!	14:27 Realistic 06/11/05
29.	#7, Yonatan - They Just Want Us...	14:49 Joe 06/11/05
30.	Any reaction?	15:19 Yonatan 06/11/05
31.	Pathetic ..	15:23 DEF 06/11/05
32.	The Israeli High Court, the laughing stock of the International Judicial Community.	15:43 JOHANES Franzen 06/11/05
33.	Heartless	15:54 Abu Mazen 06/11/05
34.	Self-Defense humane surgical strikes	16:00 Neddie 06/11/05
35.	Question about the caption	16:04 Yonatan 06/11/05
36.	#32, JOHANES Franzen - Now You Know the Truth	16:04 Joe 06/11/05
37.	what a pity	16:15 Al 06/11/05
38.	Noise, mental health and human rights	16:18 Kim: UP THE WALL 06/11/05
39.	Johanes .Descent into madness.	16:19 Ezreal 06/11/05
40.	Wondering again	16:25 Kim: UP THE WALL 06/11/05
41.	Fire with Fire: Sonic booms keep going, Let Qassam threats keep Sdoret residents awake too	16:28 Realistic 06/11/05
42.	Noise??? Are you kidding me?	16:28 Ephraim 06/11/05
43.	salam: imagin for one second	16:31 Kim: UP THE WALL 06/11/05
44.	32 frantic franzi and his twaddle	16:32 BM 06/11/05
45.	Rose: anything goes	16:36 Kim: UP THE WALL 06/11/05
46.	High court= IDF rubber stamp	16:43 Greek Citgizen 06/11/05
47.	paris intifada 2005	16:45 fagin 06/11/05
48.	make nazareth a palestinian enclave	16:46 fagin 06/11/05
49.	the worst possible crime of the andromeda project in jaffa	16:48 fagin 06/11/05
50.	open your eyes	16:59 Al-Gaza 06/11/05
51.	what a pity	17:00 Kim: UP THE WALL 06/11/05
52.	Wise policy	17:11 Kim: UP THE WALL 06/11/05
53.	Gidoen Levy	17:15 Robins 06/11/05
54.	Poor "Pals"	17:15 Kim: UP THE WALL 06/11/05
55.	america should keep its soldiers out of harm`s way	17:20 fagin 06/11/05
56.	Sharon can` t afford to ignore Gaza violence	17:25 JJ Doyle 06/11/05
57.	fagin: intifada in Paris	17:29 Kim: UP THE WALL 06/11/05
58.	Quote:The Lubavitcher Rebbe	17:47 David 06/11/05
59.	#46 Greek Citigazan. Stop oppressing ethnic minorities now.	17:52 Ezreal 06/11/05
60.	Demons	18:00 Rick S. 06/11/05

61.	GOD BLESS YOU	18:03 ZEE SARSOUR	06/11/05
62.	miss gideon haas unable to breathe in jenin because of terrible sonic boom.	18:03 fagin	06/11/05
63.	SONIC BOOMS FOR GIDEAN LEVY'S EARS	18:06 meir weinstein	06/11/05
64.	gideon haas`s next story	18:08 fagin	06/11/05
65.	New WMD-Sonic boom	18:08 Max Zinger	06/11/05
66.	5x daily - sonic boom / exchange	18:10 david	06/11/05
67.	Ezreal yes indeed	18:10 Danite	06/11/05
68.	another example of gideon haas complaint	18:12 fagin	06/11/05
69.	To Delta, #18	18:16 Abe	06/11/05
70.	David	18:17 Danite	06/11/05
71.	Hi, Danite	18:19 Kim: UP THE WALL	06/11/05
72.	Childish Hrrassment	18:25 Mark Lincoln	06/11/05
73.	Hi Kim	18:27 Danite	06/11/05
74.	Suez Crisis Twaddle	18:29 Mark Lincoln	06/11/05
75.	gideon haas ---"true qassem rockets are very frightening"	18:29 fagin	06/11/05
76.	Don` t take him serious	18:31 Mark Lincoln	06/11/05
77.	Gideon Levy is truly an Amazing man!	18:33 Yosef Cohen	06/11/05
78.	JOHANES Franzen have you been to Malmo, Sweden, lately? you would feel right at home with all those Swedomuslem or is it Islamosweddes?	18:46 Avner	06/11/05
79.	mark Lincoln	18:46 Danite	06/11/05
80.	Are Sonic Booms a Big Deal?	19:01 Jeff Northridge	06/11/05
81.	Oh dear	19:01 Gerry Hiles	06/11/05
82.	To # 20 leon Rosgarden- you have just justified the action	19:08 Yossi	06/11/05
83.	#2 Fagin; educating the Palestinians	19:12 Ben Gurion	06/11/05
84.	Danite, Kim; on the Rebbe	19:15 Ben Gurion	06/11/05
85.	Ezreal, Dutch; B`tselem is a very credible organization...	19:17 Ben Gurion	06/11/05
86.	Abe/Realistic/Khalid/Azzam	19:21 Delta	06/11/05
87.	MORE CRUEL AND ABUSIVE ACTION BY ISRAEL OVER GAZA	19:21 Dutch	06/11/05
88.	sonic booms dont kill people, Qassams do	19:23 God of Trance	06/11/05
89.	Sonic booms vs. rockets....	19:25 Levy	06/11/05
90.	Gerry	19:28 Delta	06/11/05
91.	Sonic booms...what`s the surprise?	19:29 Levy	06/11/05
92.	Hey "Realistic", I mean "Azzam"...	19:29 God of Trance	06/11/05
93.	Gaza`s real problems....some stats...	19:39 Levy	06/11/05
94.	Dutch-wait till France builds a fence	19:40 d	06/11/05
95.	Leo Tolstoy loved children	19:44 Shlomo from Tel-Aviv	06/11/05
96.	It would still be an atrocity	19:44 Kyle	06/11/05
97.	a question of geography	19:45 fagin	06/11/05
98.	Dutch	19:49 Delta	06/11/05
99.	Delta	19:56 Gerry Hiles	06/11/05
100.	I`ve driven to Air Shows JUST to Hear Sonic Booms	20:02 Gina	06/11/05
101.	Ezreal	20:05 Gina	06/11/05
102.	ben gurion	20:14 fagin	06/11/05
103.	Hey Delta! I`m not silent.....	20:17 David James Vickery	06/11/05
104.	Paul C	20:18 Gina	06/11/05
105.	"for the sake of peace between peoples."	20:21 JOHANES Franzen	06/11/05
106.	David? the call to prayer is beautiful	20:25 David James Vickery	06/11/05
107.	#33 ISRAELI HYPOCRITES & TERRORISTS IN THE SKIES OVER GAZA	20:27 Dutch	06/11/05

108. Worried about war crimes	20:33 Ben Gurion	06/11/05
109. terrorising women and children	20:36 free Palestine	06/11/05
110. Two Cents From Oregon	20:38 Bill Cannon	06/11/05
111. Getty Hiles	20:42 Gina	06/11/05
112. Dutch	20:45 Gina	06/11/05
113. #98 Delta, Isreal should pay for trauma treatment in Gazans	20:49 Dutch	06/11/05
114. Dutch	20:50 Gina	06/11/05
115. Levy: Sonic booms vs. rockets....	20:51 Kim: UP THE WALL	06/11/05
116. How many of you have claimed Pals are waging a war?	20:57 Me	06/11/05
117. What to do, what to do??	20:59 Larry	06/11/05
118. David James Vickery	21:03 Delta	06/11/05
119. Dutch	21:05 Delta	06/11/05
120. Kim.....115	21:06 Levy	06/11/05
121. If terrorists were such a minority, why aren't they	21:09 sam	06/11/05
122. Sonic Booms as a Deterrent to Palestinian Terrorism	21:10 Shimon Z. Klein	06/11/05
123. Sam	21:22 Larry	06/11/05
124. Gideon Levy is correct	21:25 Ron	06/11/05
125. Levy	21:25 Kim: UP THE WALL	06/11/05
126. #114 Gina , Israelis will never be safe behind a wall...	21:26 Dutch	06/11/05
127. Gedion Levy is correct	21:27 Ron	06/11/05
128. DUTCH 126	21:29 alan	06/11/05
129. Ron in LaLa Land	21:31 Delta	06/11/05
130. 109 free palestine	21:31 alan	06/11/05
131. Dutch	21:42 Gina	06/11/05
132. Has he lost all sense of proportion?	21:44 Oren	06/11/05
133. Ron	21:47 Gina	06/11/05



[Top](#)

[Home](#) | [Print Edition](#) | [Diplomacy](#) | [Opinion](#) | [Arts & Leisure](#) | [Sports](#) | [Jewish World](#) | [Underground](#) |

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