

## And the Doctor Shall Heal: the Israel-Palestinian Conflict

Yoram Blachar MD

Chairman, Israel Medical Association

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In these difficult times, no one is immune from the effects of the ongoing conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. Although we, as physicians, aim to remove ourselves from the sometimes sordid arena of politics and focus on values of personal care, humanitarian assistance and medical treatment, there are times when we cannot, whether by will or by circumstance, ignore the realities of the world around us.

Nowhere was this more apparent than in recent weeks, as Israel battled inexorable terrorism and staged a military reprisal. Suddenly, in addition to our regular duties, we were forced to deal with scores of tragically injured people, both Jews and Arabs, while defending ourselves against accusations by various groups and individuals – within Israel and without – that we were detaining Palestinians, shooting at ambulances, denying medical care to the Palestinian population, and violating international treaties. A recent editorial in *The Lancet* went so far as to term the Israel Defense Forces' activities as "carnage" and described the situation as a "race to the bottom in terms of respect for human rights and international humanitarian law."

We had and have no doubts that the army was not intentionally doing anything to harm innocent civilians, and that physicians, as always, were exerting tireless efforts to optimally treat all people. Nonetheless, we realized that we, as a medical association, had to formulate an official position regarding the assurance of medical services during armed conflict and to see how we could aid the IDF in ensuring the smooth provision of medical services to all. Consequently, a committee was formed, chaired by the Israel Medical Association's ethics committee chairman, Prof. Avinoam Reches, and including, among others, physicians and attorneys [Appendix I].

The members represented all sides of the political spectrum but were united in the conviction that all innocent people are entitled to humanitarian assistance and medical aid. The committee met with various groups involved in the current crisis, among them Physicians for Human Rights, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and the IDF, the latter including the coordinator of civilian activities in the territories, the chief medical officer and representatives of the military prosecutor's office. These groups presented the various problems, the efforts made to overcome these problems – each according to his unique perspective and experience.

After several meetings, the committee formulated a position

paper, subsequently adopted by the IMA secretariat [Appendix 2]. This position paper was presented, along with other documents and personal testimony, to the European Forum of Medical Associations/World Health Organization. At that meeting, the EFMA/WHO produced a short statement calling upon all doctors to strive to uphold the ethical principles with which they are entrusted, and condemning any detainment of medical vehicles or personnel not "necessitated by the immediate and compelling realities of a particular situation."

The more intensive international onslaught occurred two weeks later at the Council Meeting of the World Medical Association in Geneva. With events in Israel escalating, we were deeply concerned that a proposal might be raised to expel the IMA from the World Medical Association, as had been done to the South African Medical Association some years ago. Conversations with leaders of several other medical associations led us to believe that these concerns were not altogether unfounded. In any event, we knew that the issue would be raised, that not every nation understood the Israeli side of the story, and that it was our task to present this story. Both before and during the conference, several participants condemned Israel for allegedly violating international treaties and hindering the provision of medical services, without recognizing and taking into account the security needs of our citizens.

With the help of individuals and Jewish organizations around the world, the efforts of our staff and elected officials at the IMA, and the assistance and cooperation of the IDF, the Red Cross and other bodies, we were able to convey the complexity of the situation and the dilemmas faced by our soldiers on a daily basis. Accompanying audiovisual material that demonstrated Palestinian incitement or recorded the actual inspection of the explosives-carrying ambulance told the story in a way words could not. In addition, the many appeals by Jewish organizations, such as Hadassah Women, the Wiesenthal Center, the Anti-Defamation League, Bnai Brith and others, both to the WMA and their respective representatives, helped convince the WMA to formulate a balanced resolution. Members of the U.S. Congress and Israeli ambassadors in several countries also used their influence to recruit support for Israel.

After several days of rigorous deliberations, a formal position was drafted by a small committee and adopted by the entire forum. The resolution calls upon all those involved in the conflict to respect humanitarian values and to exert maximum effort to ensure

IDF = Israel Defense Forces

IMA = Israel Medical Association  
WMA = World Medical Association

the continuation of medical care in affected areas. However, the resolution also denounced all forms of terror and accepted the need to achieve a balance between the assurance of the delivery of services and security needs, a balance also recognized under international law.

In addition, the efforts of the IMA have borne fruit in other areas, such as the appointment of a special coordinator between the IDF's chief medical officer and the coordinator of civilian activities in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, whose job will be to facilitate the assurance of medical services to the civilian population.

To my sorrow, we have not yet seen the end of either the physical battle or the fight against propaganda. Our soldiers will continue to face difficult dilemmas every time a Palestinian Red Crescent ambulance speeds toward them. Our physicians will continue to face the emotional difficulty of treating the mangled bodies of children caught in a suicide bombing, while doing their utmost to ensure the quick and optimal access of Palestinian civilians to necessary medical care in Israel. We will all continue to dream of the day when an Israeli can go to the pizza store, and a Palestinian can reach his doctor, without it being an international event. We will all continue to dream of peace.

**Appendix 1.** List of Committee members

1. Professor Avinoam Reches, Neurologist, Chairman of the Ethics Bureau, Israel Medical Association
2. Ms. Leah Wapner, Adv., Secretary General, Israel Medical Association
3. Ms. Malke Borow, Adv., Manager, Legal Department, Israel Medical Association
4. Ms. Orna Cohen, Israel Medical Association spokesperson
5. Dr. Simona Naor, Psychiatrist and Deputy Chairman of the Ethics Bureau, Israel Medical Association
6. Prof. Francis Radai, Professor of Law, The Hebrew University, Jerusalem
7. Dr. Dafna Barsuk, Resident Surgeon, Sheba Medical Center, Tel Hashomer
8. Dr. Darwasha Aziz, Director, Emergency Department, HaEmek Hospital, Afula.
9. Mr. Alon Gelart, Adv., Attorney, former legal advisor to Prime Minister Barak and Prime Minister Sharon
10. Dr. Saul Sagiv, Orthopedist, Kaplan Hospital, Rehovot; Brigadier General of the Armored Corps, IDF
11. Mr. Menashe Raz, Advisor to the committee
12. Prof. Menachem Fainaru, Dean of Sackler Faculty of Medicine, Tel Aviv University
13. Prof. Moshe Revach, Hospital Director, Rambam Medical Center, Haifa; former Chief Medical Officer, IDF
14. Prof. Rafi Valden, Vascular Surgeon, Sheba Medical Center; leading member of Physicians for Human Rights
15. Dr. Sasson Nakar, Family Physician, Rehovot
16. Prof. Carmel Shalev, Director of the Unit for Ethics and Human Rights at the Gertner Institute, Tel Hashomer

**Appendix 2.** A position Concerning the Assurance of Medical and Health Services during the Armed Conflict between Israelis and Palestinians

1. The Israel Medical Association (IMA) is an independent, non-political organization representing all Israeli physicians, Jews and Arabs alike.
2. The IMA reasserts its conviction that life is a supreme value, together with its commitment to this value with respect to each and every individual, regardless of differences in race, religion or nationality.
3. The IMA remains firmly committed to declarations of the World Medical Association and international agreements of which it is a signatory, including those related to the protection of human life.
4. The IMA views the provision of medical and healthcare services to the civilian population and treatment of the wounded and injured as an integral part of its commitment to the preservation of human life.
5. The IMA expresses its satisfaction with the Israel Defense Forces' acknowledgment, as expressed to us by its official representatives, of its commitment to the continued assurance of these medical and health services, even in a period of armed conflict.
6. The IMA calls upon the Israel Defense Forces', in the context of this commitment and the recent Supreme Court decision, to take all possible action to ensure the continuation of essential medical services in general, and hospital services in particular, including those in areas of fighting. Directives of this nature should be conveyed and implemented down to the individual soldier in the field.
7. The IMA unequivocally denounces the employment of terrorism in general, and the use of human bombs, whose sole objective is the indiscriminate killing of innocent civilians and the spread of fear among the general public, in particular.
8. The IMA expresses deep sorrow at the loss of life and suffering caused to both peoples in the course of the present conflict, and is concerned over the spread of the conflict to innocent civilians in large population centers.
9. The IMA supports all medical teams engaged in the saving of human life and treating the victims of this conflict, often at risk to their own safety.
10. The IMA stresses once again that medical teams are entitled to absolute immunity from harm and the assurance of unrestricted freedom of movement, while they are strictly engaged in the fulfillment of their professional duties.
11. The IMA denounces any unnecessary restriction, obstruction or attempt to interfere with the activities of medical personnel in the course of their professional duties.
12. The IMA condemns the immoral use of ambulances for purposes of terrorism and sabotage.
13. The IMA is aware of the need to strike a balance between the assurance of medical and health services and the need for security, and calls upon the military establishment to preserve this balance with the greatest of care.
14. The IMA calls upon both sides to halt immediately the armed conflict that results in the spilling of human blood, loss of life and great suffering to all inhabitants of the region, and to bring an end to the conflict in a peaceful manner.

**Correspondence:** Dr. Y. Blachar, Chairman, Israel Medical Association, Twin Towers, 35 Jabotinsky St., Ramat Gan 52136, Israel.  
 Phone: (972-3) 610-0444  
 Fax: (972-3) 575-1616  
 email: malke@ima.org.il