The Israeli deputy defense minister Matan Vilnai’s much publicized remark last week\(^1\) about Gaza facing a *shoah*—the Hebrew word for the Holocaust—was widely assumed to be unpleasant hyperbole about the army’s plans for an imminent full-scale invasion of the Gaza Strip. More significantly, however, his comment offers a disturbing indication of the Israeli army’s longer-term strategy toward the Palestinians in the Occupied Territories.

Vilnai, a former general, was interviewed by Army Radio as Israel was in the midst of unleashing a series of air and ground strikes on populated areas of Gaza that killed more than 1,000 Palestinians, at least half of whom were civilians and 25 of whom were children, according to the Israeli human rights group B’Tselem. The interview also took place in the wake of a rocket fired from Gaza that killed a student in Sderot and other rockets that hit the center of the southern city of Ashkelon. Vilnai stated: “The more Qassam fire intensifies and the rockets reach a longer range, they [the Palestinians of Gaza] will bring upon themselves a bigger shoah because we will use all our might to defend ourselves.” His comment, picked up by the Reuters wire service, was soon making headlines around the world.

Presumably uncomfortable with a senior public figure in Israel comparing his government’s policies to the Nazi plan to exterminate European Jewry, many news services referred to Vilnai’s clearly articulated threat as a “warning,” as though he was prophesying a cataclysmic natural event over
which he and the Israeli army had no control. Nonetheless, officials understood the damage that the translation from Hebrew of Vilnai’s remark could do to Israel’s image abroad. And sure enough, Palestinian leaders were soon exploiting the comparison, with both the Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas and the exiled Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal stating that a “holocaust” was unfolding in Gaza.

Within hours, the Israeli Foreign Ministry was launching a large *hasbara* (propaganda) campaign through its diplomats, as the *Jerusalem Post* reported. In a related move, a spokesman for Vilnai explained that the word shoah also meant “disaster”; this, rather than a holocaust, was what the minister had been referring to. Clarifications were issued by many media outlets. However, no one in Israel was fooled. Shoah was long ago reserved for the Holocaust, much as the Arabic word *nakba* (or “catastrophe”) is nowadays used only to refer to the Palestinians’ dispossession by Israel in 1948. Certainly, the Israeli media in English translated Vilnai’s use of shoah as “holocaust.”

But this is not the first time that Vilnai has expressed extreme views about Gaza’s future. Last summer, he began quietly preparing a plan on behalf of his boss, the defense minister Ehud Barak, to declare Gaza a “hostile entity” and dramatically reduce the essential services supplied by Israel—as longtime occupier—to its inhabitants, including electricity and fuel. The cuts were finally implemented late last year after the Israeli courts gave their blessing. Vilnai and Barak, both former military men, like so many other Israeli politicians, have been “selling” this policy—of choking off basic services to Gaza—to Western public opinion ever since.

Under international law, Israel, as the occupying power, has an obligation to guarantee the welfare of the civilian population in Gaza, a fact forgotten when the media reported Israel’s decision to declare Gaza a hostile entity. The pair has therefore claimed tendentiously that the humanitarian needs of Gazans are still being safeguarded by the limited supplies being allowed through and that therefore the measures do not constitute collective punishment. Last October, after a meeting of defense officials, Vilnai said of Gaza: “Because this is an entity that is hostile to us, there is no reason for us to supply them with electricity beyond the minimum required to prevent a crisis.”

Three months later, Vilnai went further, arguing that Israel should cut off “all responsibility” for Gaza, though, in line with the advice of Israel’s attorney general, he has been careful not to suggest that this would punish ordinary Gazans excessively. Instead, he said that disengagement should be taken to its logical conclusion: “We want to stop supplying electricity to them, stop supplying them with water and medicine, so that it would come from another place.” He suggested that Egypt might be forced to take over responsibility. Vilnai’s various comments are a reflection of the new thinking inside the