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Israel's latest self-inflicted wound

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The incredible level of human suffering and civilian casualties in Gaza will haunt Israel for years to come

Israel's latest offensive in Gaza has brought with it two things that are disturbingly familiar: first, huge numbers of civilian casualties; second, endless protestations by Israel that it is not only trying to do everything it can to reduce those casualties, but that it has "the most moral army in the world," no less. The horrors being meted out on the innocent people of Gaza are bad enough, but they are compounded by Israel's endless and fatuous claims of unique morality, which are entirely inconsistent with the known facts.

At least 600 Palestinians have been killed in the violence so far. The UN has estimated that over 70% of them are civilians. Even if the UN is overestimating, that still means an enormous percentage of those killed by Israeli fire are civilians. I haven't seen any estimate in which the number of child victims was less than 100. The death tolls on Sunday and Monday both reached over 100 Palestinian dead, a shocking figure in any conflict.

Israel cites two reasons for these deaths. Either they are the consequence of "regrettable mistakes," which Israel has acknowledged on a small handful of occasions during this campaign, or they are the result of Hamas using the Palestinian population as "human shields." As Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu cynically and cruelly put it, Palestinians, including Hamas, seek "telegenically dead Palestinians for their cause."

I have been very critical of Hamas's rule in Gaza and its role in the current conflict, but it's just not possible to dehumanize the 1.8 million innocent Palestinians of Gaza as being simply "human shields" for Hamas. Even if Hamas does have a practice and policy of seeking to deter attacks on strategic targets by ensuring that civilian deaths will occur, it doesn't explain numerous instances in which Palestinian civilians, and indeed children, appear to have been deliberately targeted for death. And it's not logistically possible for Hamas to actually make the entirety, or even the majority, of the Gaza population into literal "human shields."

What never gets mentioned is that Israel's military had a deliberate policy of using Palestinian civilians as,

literally, human shields, in its operations in the occupied territories until this practice was made illegal by the Israeli Supreme Court in 2005. The Israeli military protested that ruling, arguing that the use of Palestinian civilians could "defuse tensions."

The dozens of disturbing and inexplicable incidents in which civilians have been killed either deliberately or with wanton disregard for their lives during this campaign appears to have struck Secretary of State John Kerry. Appearing on the Fox News Sunday television program, Mr. Kerry mumbled during a break, "It's a hell of a pinpoint operation, it's a hell of a pinpoint operation."

Among the incidents that led to this widespread international reaction was the killing of 24 members of the Abu Jamaa family in a single airstrike. Israel says it ordered the evacuation of the area, and many others, but in Gaza there is often nowhere to go. The UN says its facilities are full to the brim with over 100,000 internally displaced persons, and that they have no more space for those fleeing the conflict.

Other targets include various health centers, mosques and a home for the handicapped. Hamas is cynical enough, to be sure, to have placed some of these targets in danger. And they have urged Palestinians to stay put when they were better advised to try to flee, if possible. But none of that explains or excuses the extraordinary proportion of civilian and child deaths in this bombardment.

Hamas can be criticized for refusing an Egyptian-sponsored ceasefire proposal that would have been politically difficult for the organization but also would have brought relief to the innocent people of Gaza. When the dust settles, they will have to explain to the Palestinian and Arab public why they preferred to keep fighting when the cost was so extraordinary.

But that will not exempt Israel from having to explain how, if their forces follow even the elementary rules of warfare, let alone the elevated ones it claims, so many of the dead are civilians, women and children. Israel's international reputation, already badly battered, has now suffered another grievous, self-inflicted wound. Even its friends around the world are deeply disturbed by what distinctly appears to be a wanton disregard for innocent life, a willingness to engage in indiscriminate attacks, and a lack of accountability when its forces deliberately target noncombatants. Israel, too, will have difficult questions to answer.

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