

Shlomo Brody

# All Options Grim

No choice that Israel makes can avoid civilian casualties—a reality that will test the support of the civilized world.

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On October 7, thousands of Hamas terrorists together murdered over 1,300 Israelis in villages near the border of the Gaza Strip. Most of their victims were civilians. Among their infamies, the terrorists torched the homes of families hiding in in-home bomb shelters, burning the families to death; they killed 260 partygoers at a music festival and raped many of the young women in attendance; and they took some 200 Israelis into captivity in Gaza, including toddlers and grandmothers. All told, Hamas was responsible for the largest and most horrific attack on Jews since the Holocaust ended in 1945.

Two days after Hamas's murderous raids, Israel announced that it was shutting off the Gaza Strip's water, gas, and electricity supplies. World leaders soon warned that the Israelis were creating an "untenable" humanitarian crisis in Gaza, while a European Union official condemned Israel's "indiscriminate attack on civilians." In response to American and international pressure, Israel partially restored the strip's water supply.

What does the civilized world want Israel to do? Since the attack, Israel has launched thousands of air raids on Gaza, destroying key elements of Hamas military infrastructure. Meanwhile, Hamas showers the Israeli populace (that is, random civilian targets) with its own rocket attacks. Israel's air power is far superior to Hamas's, but Israel does not desire, and would not benefit from, a protracted rocket war. Israel left Gaza in 2005, and Hamas took over the strip from the Palestinian Authority through a violent coup in 2007. In the years since, Hamas has instigated conflicts with Israel in 2008, 2012, 2014, and 2021, launching intermittent rocket strikes to terrorize Israeli citizens in-between. The Jewish state's response should be that of any normal country: to end its enemy's ability to threaten it.

Israel has urged civilians to leave the northern region of the Gaza Strip, providing safety corridors to southern Gaza. Hamas leaders, however, have urged and sometimes forced Palestinians to stay in the danger zone, placing large obstacles on the evacuation roads; the IDF claims that Hamas explosives killed 70 fleeing refugees. These actions are in keeping with Hamas's long-standing tactic of embedding its fighters within crowded civilian neighborhoods, resulting in the inevitable deaths of many noncombatants.

Regional actors such as Egypt (which refuses to open its borders to Gazan refugees) and superpowers like China have argued that Israel's approach has shifted from one of self-defense to one of "collective punishment." Human Rights Watch claims Israel's response, and the sheer number of resulting Gazan casualties, will likely by itself constitute a war crime. Even the United States, whose government has been supportive of its ally, has cautioned Israel that it can't tolerate excessive civilian casualties.

The Biden administration's warning highlights the Jewish state's precarious position. Absent a popular Gazan uprising against Hamas, Israel won't be able to uproot the threat against it without incurring significant civilian casualties. It could apply siege pressure, deploying the oldest of military tactics to cause an enemy's surrender. Opponents claim that doing so would be impermissible, since it causes equal civilian and combatant suffering. Instead, Israel could use military strikes after first warning Gazans to flee, but here, critics argue, to dislocate civilians is to cause a humanitarian crisis.

Israel directs its air strikes only at military targets. But Hamas commanders and fighters don't wear uniforms; they hide in bunkers under residential neighborhoods, and fire their weapons adjacent to hospitals, mosques, and schools. Israelis thus find it hard to distinguish between combatants and noncombatants, and even harder to shoot the former without harming the latter. In any case, air strikes alone won't be militarily sufficient, and graphic pictures on television and a rising Gazan body count will only raise diplomatic pressure on Israel.

Failing those options, Israel could attempt a ground incursion. This would lead to the death of many Israeli soldiers but would be tolerated by Israeli citizens if it eliminated Hamas's fighting power and restored peace and security.

Yes, urban warfare with ruthless terrorists who use their own people as human shields will inevitably lead to a high civilian-casualty count. Such a campaign wouldn't succeed any other way; it is a tragic fact of asymmetric warfare. Israel will try its best to avoid citizens in the line of fire, but it cannot be held responsible for collateral deaths caused by the decisions of its enemy. Gory pictures will emerge from Gaza. The fault lies with those who control the territory and endanger the innocent.

Here, then, lies the open question facing the civilized world. It recognizes the horrors committed by Hamas and the necessity of its elimination. Yet the steadfast support of the international community is already wavering. Will it recognize the justice of using the necessary means to stop Hamas's barbarism? At stake isn't just the future of the Middle East but the civilized world's ability to take the morally complex actions needed to eliminate such evil from its midst.

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