**Hamas Human Shields are to Blame, Not Israel**

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**Palestinian rockets are like the Nazi V1s. Civilian casualties were inevitable then and now**

‘The Israelis are doing it all wrong. The RAF didn’t fly off to bomb Belfast in the troubles.”

These words from a respected media commentator embody the extraordinary lack of understanding by so many in this country who think the Israelis’ fight with Hamas is like ours with the IRA and can be dealt with in the same way.

Gaza is not Northern Ireland and Hamas is not the IRA. We governed and policed Ulster to wipe out the terrorists. In Gaza the government are the terrorists — designated as such around the world. In 2005 Israel withdrew all its citizens and security forces from Gaza.

Since then it has been a separate state — now under the heel of Hamas — at war with Israel and dedicated to the extermination of the Jewish state.

Hamas is a heavily armed militia, fighting from territory it controls. The IRA, for the most part, was more like a highly dangerous criminal gang that could be dealt with by soldiers acting as policemen.

The absence of Israeli forces in Gaza for nine years let Hamas build tunnel networks to smuggle in military materiel, manufacture and store munitions, deploy forces and infiltrate beneath the border to launch attacks against Israel. It also gave Hamas the freedom to prepare formidable defences, the reason why there have been so many casualties since the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) began its ground offensive a week ago.

For a while there were barricaded “no-go” areas in Belfast and Londonderry which, until broken down in 1972, prevented the entry of troops. But the security forces never withdrew from the province and did not need to launch raids from Britain or fight their way back in.

A closer comparison is Britain’s battle with the Nazis’ V rockets. Like Hamas’s rockets, the V1 “doodlebug” was an explosive missile, intended to kill civilians indiscriminately. At the height of the campaign more than 100 V1s a day were fired at the south coast of England, fewer than the average of 130 Hamas rockets fired at Israel in this conflict. Like Hamas’s rockets, V1s regularly sent terrified British civilians racing to the shelters.

And yes, the RAF did bomb the towns that harboured them. In 1943 Bomber Command launched a 600-bomber raid to destroy the assembly shops in Peenemunde and in the first six months of 1944, 2,000 tons of explosives were dropped on launch sites on the French coast.

Hamas cannot defend its rocket sites with ack-ack guns and fighter aircraft. Instead it uses human shields, deliberately locating missiles among the civilian population. This tactic is very familiar to our troops fighting the Taliban in Helmand. I had to order raids into densely packed high-rise apartments in Kabul where terrorist cells were using human shields, including babies.

The presence of civilians at the V1 sites was not a significant consideration for Britain, which had to stop the rockets at any cost: 732 innocent civilians died in the raid on Peenemunde. In different circumstances the Israelis use the most sophisticated and comprehensive means of avoiding civilian casualties yet employed by any army in the world. Multilayer surveillance systems confirm whether there are civilians in the target area; triple-lock authorisation is required for every strike; phone calls, leaflet drops, radio messages and harmless explosive charges warn civilians to leave. Many missions are aborted if civilians remain in a target zone.

The tragedy of so many civilian casualties is to a large extent due to Hamas’s policy of compelling men, women and children to stay in the path of danger.

The Israeli prime minister, Binyamin Netanyahu, blamed this use of human shields after 15 people, many of them children, were killed in the shelling of a UN-run school. Hamas hopes this will deter the Israelis from bombing but, with barbaric reasoning, its greater hope is that the attacks will go ahead, killing its own civilians. We have all seen the images of dead babies on Gaza’s mortuary slabs. No amount of protest from Israel about the morality of its armed forces and their adherence to the laws of war can outweigh the influence of these images, used by Hamas supporters to incite mass protest against Israel.

It is a mistake to believe these marches are simply the natural outpouring of support for bleeding and beleaguered Palestinians. The chants of “Jews back to Birkenau” would have had Oswald Moseley bristling with pride.

Humanitarian groups and world leaders, including Nick Clegg condemn the IDF for war crimes and Ban Ki Moon characterised Israeli military operations as an atrocity. This rising condemnation of Israel’s defensive operations — lawful under the Geneva conventions — plays right into Hamas’s hands. It validates their criminal use of human shields and will encourage jihadist groups everywhere to follow suit.