**Gaza's Civilian Casualties: The Truth Is Very Different**

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"So are you going after innocent civilians or is it incompetence Colonel Lerner?" asks the interviewer, her face contorted with a contempt apparently reserved only for Israelis. Such shrill disrespect hurled at an American or British officer would alienate viewers, and, at an Arab commander, provoke accusations of racism.

This line of questioning – repeated across the networks on a daily basis – betrays a naïve and uncomprehending willingness to believe, and encourages viewers to believe, the absurd notion that the Israel Defence Force [IDF] is commanded and manned from top to bottom by psychopathic baby-killing thugs.

To suggest that military incompetence is the only explanation for civilian deaths other than deliberate mass murder reveals a breathtaking but unsurprising ignorance of the realities of combat.

Although rarely allowed to complete so much as a single sentence, Israeli attempts to explain IDF targeting policies are inevitably dismissed as laughable fabrication.

The truth is very different. The IDF has developed the most comprehensive and sophisticated measures to minimize civilian casualties during attacks against legitimate military targets.

Mandatory, multi-sensor intelligence and surveillance systems to confirm the presence or absence of civilians precede attacks on every target from the air. Text messages, phone calls and radio messages in Arabic warn occupants to leave. Air-dropped leaflets include maps showing safe areas. When warnings go unheeded, aircraft drop non-lethal explosives to warn that an attack is imminent.

Only when pilots and air controllers are sure that civilians are clear of the target will authorization be given to attack. When pilots use laser-guided munitions they must have pre-designated safe areas to which to divert the missiles in flight should civilians suddenly appear.

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| A Hamas military commander [recounts on Palestinian TV](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=giJlG3KXq8c) how Israeli forces gave advance warning to him, to evacuate his home before bombing it. He goes on to describe how after the warning, he rushed to gather friends, family and neighbors on the roof of the building. |

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| Two pictures showing Palestinian human shields gathered on buildings for which the Israel Air Force has given advance warning of a pending bombing. |

In the last few days IDF pilots have aborted many missions because civilians remained in the target area.

Ground forces have equivalent engagement procedures, although the nature of ground combat means that these are blunter and less sophisticated. Discussions with IDF infantrymen fresh from the fight on the Gaza border confirm, however, that avoiding civilian casualties is uppermost in their minds even when under fire themselves.

Meanwhile back in the safety of the studio, the interviewer's visible fury at the IDF Spokesman has got the better of any professional objectivity: "You go on endlessly about all the warnings you give but the fact is you have killed one-and-a-half thousand people, the overwhelming majority of them civilians!"

But of course the colonel is not permitted to give a proper answer that might help viewers understand the reality of the situation.

With few exceptions, reporters, commentators and analysts unquestioningly accept the casualty statistics given by Gaza's Hamas-controlled medical authorities, who ascribe *all* deaths to the IDF. Is anyone in Gaza dying of natural causes? Mass executions of "collaborators," and civilians killed by malfunctioning Hamas rockets, are all attributed to IDF fire.

Are the "overwhelming majority" of the dead really civilians? It would seem so. We see a great deal of grotesque and heart-rending footage of dead and bleeding women and children but never so much as a glimpse of killed or wounded fighters. Nor do reporters question or comment on the complete absence of Gazan military casualties, an extraordinary phenomenon unique to this conflict. The reality of course is that Hamas make great efforts to segregate their military casualties to preserve the fiction that Israel is killing civilians only. There are also increasing indications that Hamas, through direct force or threat, are preventing journalists from filming their fighters, whether dead or alive.

We will not get to the truth until the battle is over. But we know now that Hamas have ordered their people to report all deaths as innocent civilians. We know too that Hamas has a track record of lying about casualties. After Operation Cast Lead, the 2008-09 fighting in Gaza, the IDF estimated that of 1,166 Palestinian deaths, 709 were fighters. Hamas – backed by several NGOs – claimed that only 49 of its fighters had been killed, the rest were innocent civilians. Much later they were forced to admit that the IDF had been right all along and between 600 and 700 of the casualties had in fact been fighters. But the short-memoried media are incapable of factoring this in before broadcasting their ill-founded and inflammatory assertions.

Analysis of casualty details [released by Qatar-based *Al Jazeera*](http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/07/gaza-under-seige-naming-dead-2014710105846549528.html) indicate that so far in the conflict most of those killed in Gaza have been young men of fighting age, *not* women, children or old people. According to one analyst, despite comprising around 50% of the population, the proportion of women among the dead is 21%.

Preliminary analysis by the Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center in Israel suggests that 71, or 46.7%, of the first 152 Palestinians killed were fighters and 81, or 53.3%, non-involved civilians.

None of this analysis is definitive. But it does cast doubt upon the accusations of indiscriminate attack against the population by the IDF and upon the UN estimates – widely trumpeted as fact by the media and the not-exactly unbiased United Nations – that between 70 and 80% of Palestinian casualties have been civilians.

Nevertheless, many innocent civilians have tragically been killed. How has this happened, given the IDF's measures aimed at minimizing such deaths?

IDF commanders say they never intentionally fire at targets where uninvolved civilians are present, a policy that goes much further than the Geneva Conventions demand. This policy has been confirmed to me by foot soldiers on the ground and F16 pilots carrying out strikes into Gaza.

But mistakes happen. Surveillance and intelligence can never be foolproof. There have been reports of Hamas forcing civilians back in once buildings have been evacuated. There is sometimes unexpected fallout from attacks, for example when an adjacent building containing civilians collapses, often caused by secondary explosions resulting from Hamas's own munitions.

Errors can be made in interpretation of imagery, passage of information and inputting of target data. We don't yet know what happened to the four boys tragically killed on a Gaza beach; it is not credible that they were identified as children and then deliberately killed.

Weapons guidance systems sometimes malfunction and bombs, bullets or missiles can land where they are not supposed to. Even the most hi-tech communications systems can fail at the critical moment.

Nowhere are these errors more frequent and catastrophic than in ground combat, where commanders and soldiers experience chaos, noise, smoke, fear, exhaustion, danger, shock, maiming, death and destruction that are beyond the comprehension of our interviewer in her air conditioned TV studio.

These mistakes and malfunctions happen in all fighting armies and in all conflicts. And in all conflicts, mistakes include the deaths of soldiers by friendly fire. Do those who condemn the killing of Palestinian civilians as deliberate acts by the IDF suggest that the friendly fire incidents in Gaza are also intentional?

The Israeli policy of not attacking targets where civilians are present is likely however to be deliberately waived in one specific situation. If troops are under lethal fire from an enemy position, the IDF are entitled to attack the target even with the certainty that civilians will be killed, subject to the usual rules of proportionality.

By definition Israeli soldiers' lives are placed at greater risk by restrictive rules of engagement intended to minimize civilian casualties. But commanders in the field must balance their concern for civilians with the preservation of their own men's lives and fighting effectiveness.

These realities aside, all Palestinian civilian casualties in this conflict result ultimately from Gaza terrorists' aggression against Israel, and Hamas's use of human shields – the most important plank of Hamas's war-fighting policy.

Storing and firing weapons within densely populated areas, compelling civilians to stay put when warned to leave, luring Israeli forces to attack and kill their own people, the Palestinian body count is vital to Hamas's propaganda war that aims to bring international pressure on Israel and incite anti-Israeli and anti-Semitic hatred around the world.

This sickening exploitation of their own people's suffering, and media's complicity in it, is nowhere more cynically demonstrated than in the operating theaters of the Gaza Strip. Without the slightest regard for life-saving hygiene, or for the care, privacy or dignity of the wounded, Palestinian officials enthusiastically hustle camera crews in to the emergency room as desperate surgeons battle for a bleeding and broken child's life.