Top US general: Israel protected civilian lives in Gaza

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Chairman of Joint Chiefs Martin Dempsey says IDF went to ‘extraordinary lengths’ to save innocents; America studying methods

Israel went to “extraordinary lengths” to prevent civilian casualties during this summer’s conflict in the Gaza Strip, the top US military leader said Thursday.

“I actually do think that Israel went to extraordinary lengths to limit collateral damage and civilian casualties,” said General Martin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, during a forum at the Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs in New York City.

“In this kind of conflict, where you are held to a standard that your enemy is not held to, you’re going to be criticized for civilian casualties,” he added, according to Reuters.

The Hamas tunnels “caused the IDF some significant challenges,” Dempsey said. “But they did some extraordinary things to try to limit civilian casualties, to include… making it known that they were going to destroy a particular structure.”

Dempsey listed Israel Defense Forces measures such as the “roof-knocking” and the dropping of warning leaflets as part of their attempts to protect civilian lives.

“The IDF is not interested in creating civilian casualties. They’re interested in stopping the shooting of rockets and missiles out of the Gaza Strip and into Israel,” Dempsey argued.

Palestinians await the arrival of Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah (unseen) during a tour to some of the areas worst hit by the 50-day war between Israel and Gaza in July and August, during a visit to the Shejaiya neighborhood of Gaza City, on October 9, 2014. (photo credit: Mohammed Abed/AFP)

Palestinians await the arrival of Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah (unseen) during a tour to some of the areas worst hit by the 50-day war between Israel and Gaza in July and August, during a visit to the Shejaiya neighborhood of Gaza City, on October 9, 2014. (photo credit: AFP/Mohammed Abed)

The American general recounted that an American delegation visited Israel three months ago to learn lessons from the conflict, “to include the measures they took to prevent civilian casualties and what they did with tunneling.”

Dempsey’s statements stand in stark contrast to a recent Amnesty International report accusing Israel of displaying “callous indifference” in attacks on family homes in the densely populated coastal area.

The Gaza war left more than 2,100 Palestinians dead, including many civilians, according to Hamas and UN officials. Israel says the number of terrorists killed was much higher than the figures released by Hamas, and accuses the organization of using civilians as human shields.

On the Israeli side, 66 soldiers and six civilians were killed.

During the 50 days of fighting, Hamas fired thousands of rockets and mortars at Israeli towns and cities, including Tel Aviv, and used a sophisticated tunnel network to carry out attacks on Israeli military encampments in southern Israel, close to the Gaza border. Some of the tunnels also had exits abutting Israeli civilian communities, giving Hamas the ability to attack them as well.

For its part, Israeli forces carried out sustained aerial, artillery and infantry attacks on Gaza.

Dempsey also said during the talk that airstrikes on Iran would set back, but not destroy, its nuclear capabilities, as a deadline is looming for a deal between Tehran and major powers.

Israel in the past has raised the threat of military action to prevent Iran from getting the bomb, while Washington has left its options open.

“We do have the capability — were we asked to use it — to address an Iranian nuclear capability,” said Dempsey.

“But… as we look at using the military instrument if necessary to address the Iranian nuclear issue, that would delay it, it will not eliminate it,” he told the forum.

AP and AFP contributed to this report.