



Policy Analysis /
PolicyWatch 2305

Six Ways Hamas Could Limit Civilian Casualties in Gaza

by [Jeffrey White](#)

Aug 13, 2014

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Jeffrey White](#)

Jeffrey White is an adjunct defense fellow at The Washington Institute, specializing in the military and security affairs of the Levant and Iran.



Brief Analysis

Hamas should be shielding the people of Gaza from the worst of the fighting, not using them as human shields.

Hamas, the de facto government of Gaza, has repeatedly avoided taking basic measures to protect the civilian population during wartime, despite the fact that civilians have been killed in substantial numbers in all three conflicts with Israel since 2009. The group's willingness to accept high casualty counts suggests that this is part of its political and military strategy. When used as human shields, civilians provide cover for Hamas military activities, and the resultant casualties serve the group's propaganda interests. In short, Hamas is acting more like a guerrilla group fighting an insurgency than a government responsible for the safety of its citizenry.

Some have argued that Gaza is too small and Israel too strong for Hamas to conduct military operations in a way that does not put civilians in danger. Yet there are at least six actions the group could take to limit such casualties. These steps are described below, roughly ordered by magnitude of effect -- though Hamas is unlikely to take any of them.

MOVE WEAPONS AND FIGHTERS AWAY FROM BUILT-UP AREAS

Hamas could move its forces away from densely populated areas, at least during wartime. If Israel knows that the group is not firing from within or close to civilian buildings or using them for other military purposes, it has no incentive to attack them -- in fact quite the reverse given the political costs Israel has incurred due to civilian casualties. The perimeter of Gaza contains considerable open territory and areas with relatively low population; not all of the Strip meets the typical definition of Gaza as one of the world's most densely populated areas. For example, instead of concentrating rocket launchers in the populous Beit Lahiyah neighborhood of northern Gaza, Hamas

could move at least some of them to the open area between that community and the border. Similarly, instead of concentrating its defensive positions in major built-up areas such as Shejaiya and Beit Hanoun, it could construct defenses in more open areas to the east and north.

These steps would move much of the fighting out of dense civilian areas to more open space. Even if the population remained in place in wartime, far fewer civilians would be at risk. Of course, this approach would expose Hamas forces to greater danger from Israeli fire, but it is a generally accepted notion among civilized peoples that military personnel accept greater risk in war than do civilians. Israel certainly accepts this as a matter of course and has paid the price in military casualties.

EVACUATE CIVILIANS FROM DEFENDED LOCALITIES

If Hamas is going to fight from within urban areas rather than more open spaces, it could evacuate the population to areas where fighting is not occurring. But as has been seen during this war and Operation Cast Lead in 2008-2009, Hamas and other militant groups in Gaza systematically organize civilian areas for combat while the population remains in place.

For example, one recent Israeli photomap of the Shejaiya district identified over 300 military positions in a roughly four-square-kilometer area, not including mines and booby traps. Moreover, UN maps of this district following Israeli strikes show that damage was concentrated in areas where Hamas had concentrated its military positions. If Hamas is going to fight from such neighborhoods, why not evacuate the population to a safer area? Even if there are no completely safe areas in Gaza, there are areas of relatively greater safety. At the very least, Hamas should not encourage the population to stay in neighborhoods where fighting is imminent, as it has done when the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) warn civilians to leave.

DO NOT USE CIVILIAN BUILDINGS FOR MILITARY PURPOSES

Israel has struck or damaged hundreds of civilian structures during Operation Protective Edge, including mosques, homes, and, reportedly, UN facilities. According to Israeli authorities, most of these structures were hit because they served as military facilities, or because military activity was occurring in close proximity to them. Without a doubt, Hamas has militarized many civilian buildings as command posts, weapons storage facilities, fighting positions, and rocket launch sites. And Israel and its forces have been fired on from within or adjacent to these structures. When the IDF strikes these facilities, civilian casualties can and do occur, regardless of any precautions Israel takes. In some cases, Palestinians have increased the risk by ignoring Israeli evacuation warnings or even moving into targeted facilities.

Hamas could move its forces and weapons to designated military areas (headquarters, barracks, storage depots) like most governments do, or deploy them to more open areas as described above, or even hide more of them underground. Yet it chooses not to because using civilian facilities gives its military forces a degree of protection and increases the political cost to Israel when civilians are killed and mosques or hospitals are destroyed.

USE THE MILITARY TUNNEL SYSTEM AS CIVILIAN SHELTERS

Hamas has created a very large tunnel system, extending many kilometers, to protect its leadership and military assets, as well as to enable defensive fighting and offensive actions into Israel. Although the IDF has discovered and destroyed thirty-two such tunnels during the ground phase of Operation Protective Edge, many more tunnels and underground facilities exist in areas that were not targeted. It seems reasonable to conclude that some portion of this system could be repurposed as civilian shelters and medical facilities -- especially since much of the material used to build the tunnels was originally sent to Gaza for civilian/humanitarian purposes. For example, some or all of

the civilians fleeing from the areas most affected by combat could be sheltered in tunnels. To be sure, Hamas would need some means of clearly designating these tunnels as shelters, but that does not seem like a difficult task.

PUT FIGHTERS IN UNIFORMS

During peacetime, fighters from Hamas's military "wing," the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, are seen in all manner of camouflage and military uniforms openly and proudly displaying their weapons and military skills. In wartime, however, these uniforms are nowhere to be found, and even the fighters themselves are rarely seen. The large international press corps in Gaza during the war has been unable to spot more than a few combatants, and these men were typically dressed in civilian clothing (sometimes even women's clothes) with weapons hidden. This approach clearly increases the risk to innocent civilians, forcing Israeli troops to make difficult decisions in the heat of combat: shoot, don't shoot, call for fire, hold fire. Putting Hamas fighters back in uniform would reduce the chances of IDF troops mistakenly firing on civilians, especially if the group remains intent on fighting in occupied urban areas.

DO NOT USE AMBULANCES AND MEDICAL FACILITIES FOR MILITARY PURPOSES

Finally, Hamas could refrain from transporting uninjured military personnel in civilian ambulances, and from using medical facilities as fighting positions and rocket launch sites. Israel has presented convincing video evidence of such activity, which even on a small scale poses significantly higher risk to medical personnel and patients.

CONCLUSION

Hamas should not get a pass when it comes to shielding the people of Gaza from the worst of the fighting. Taken together, the above measures could significantly reduce civilian casualties as well as damage to civilian infrastructure. Of course, they would also increase Hamas's military casualties and damage to its military infrastructure. Yet none of these measures would require the group to end "resistance" or demilitarize. And none would require an international inspection regime, though that might be helpful for verification purposes. These are basic measures that ask nothing more of Hamas than to acknowledge the risk its military operations pose to its own population, and accept some increase in casualties among its fighters instead.

As mentioned previously, though, there is little chance the group will implement any of these measures. Using civilians as human shields can be an effective military strategy, and there is no real political or military incentive for Hamas to act otherwise -- in fact, these proposals would be to the group's political and military disadvantage in the current climate. As long as the world sees Israel as the primary mechanism of civilian casualties, and as long as many Gaza civilians continue to be more concerned with "resistance" than their lives, Hamas has no reason to change its way of war.

Jeffrey White is a defense fellow with The Washington Institute and a former senior defense intelligence officer. ❖



[View/Print Page as PDF](#)

SHARE



EMAIL ALERTS



[Sign Up](#)



TO TOP

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

The Dangers of the United States Ignoring Intra-Kurdish Dialogue in Syria

May 11, 2021

Azad Ahmed Ali



BRIEF ANALYSIS

The Assad Regime Is Using ISIS to Justify its Activities in Eastern Syria

May 10, 2021

Ishtar Al Shami



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Bahrain's Interlocking Regional and Domestic Tensions

May 10, 2021

Simon Henderson

TOPICS

[Arab-Israeli Relations](#)

[Military and Security](#)

[Peace Process](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Palestinians](#)

STAY UP TO DATE



[SIGN UP FOR EMAIL ALERTS](#)



THE
WASHINGTON INSTITUTE
for Near East Policy

1111 19th Street NW - Suite 500
Washington D.C. 20036
Tel: 202-452-0650
Fax: 202-223-5364

[Contact](#)

[Press Room](#)

[Subscribe](#)

The Washington Institute seeks to advance a balanced and realistic understanding of American interests in the Middle East and to promote the policies that secure them.

The Institute is a 501(c)3 organization; all donations are tax-deductible.

[About TWI](#) /

[Support the Institute](#)



