

# The Rules of War

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Articles & Testimony

**T**he conflict in the Middle East is about much more than Israel and Hezbollah, or even Hezbollah's Syrian and Iranian sponsors. What is at stake are the very rules of war that underpin the entire international order.

Sadly, judging from how most of the world has responded to Israel's military action against Hezbollah, these rules have been completely abandoned.

The rules of war boil down to one central principle: the need to distinguish combatants from noncombatants. Those who condemned Israel for what happened at Qana, rather than placing the blame for this unfortunate tragedy squarely on Hezbollah and its state sponsors, have rewarded those for whom this moral principle is meaningless and have condemned a state in which this principle has always guided military and political decision making.

Faced with enemies who openly call for its destruction and victimized by unremitting wars and terrorism since well before it was born, Israel has risked the lives of its citizens and its soldiers to abide by this principle in a way that is unprecedented in the history of nations.

Here is but one of countless examples: In 2003, at the height of the Palestinian terror war against Israel, our intelligence services discovered the location of a meeting of the senior leadership of Hamas, an organization pledged to the annihilation of the Jewish state and responsible for some of the deadliest terrorist attacks ever carried out against Israel.

We knew that a one-ton bomb would destroy the three-story building and kill the Hamas leadership. But we also knew that such a bomb would endanger about 40 families who lived in the vicinity. We decided to use a smaller bomb that would destroy only the top floor of the building. As it turned out, the Hamas leaders were meeting on the ground floor. They lived to terrorize another day.

Imagine for a moment that the United States had advance knowledge of the meeting place of al-Qaeda's senior leadership. Does anyone believe that there would be a debate about what size bomb to use, much less that any leader would authorize insufficient force to do the job?

So while it is legitimate to question whether Israel should go to such extreme lengths to avoid civilian casualties, it is preposterous to argue that Israel uses excessive force. Even more absurd was the shameful statement last week that Israel appeared to have deliberately targeted U.N. officials -- a statement fit for a knave or a fool, not for the secretary general of the United Nations. Rather than lead the fight against those who target civilians and use them as human shields, Secretary General Kofi Annan has strengthened them.

It is clear to any objective observer that Hezbollah is using Lebanese civilians as human shields. It builds its headquarters in densely populated areas, embeds its fighters in towns and villages, and deliberately places missiles in private homes, even constructing additions to existing structures specifically to house missile launchers.

The reason terrorist groups such as Hezbollah use human shields is elementary. They try to exploit the respect for innocent human life that is the hallmark of any civilized society to place that society in a no-win situation. If it fails to

respond to terror attacks, it endangers its own citizens. If it responds, it runs the risk of killing innocents, earning world opprobrium and inviting diplomatic pressure to stand down.

Hoping to retain its high moral standards in the face of such a cynical enemy, Israel has made every effort to avoid harming civilians. We have dropped fliers, sent telephone messages and broadcast radio announcements so that innocents can get out of harm's way. In doing so, we imperil our own citizens since, by losing the element of surprise, we invariably allow some of the enemy to escape with their missiles.

But at Qana, Hezbollah responded to Israel's compassion with more cynical brutality. After launching missiles at Israel, the terrorists rushed inside a building. When Israel fired a precision-guided missile to strike at the terrorists, scores of civilians, including children, were killed.

The difference between us and the terrorists is clear: We endanger ourselves to protect their civilians. They endanger their own civilians to protect themselves.

If tragedies such as Qana are not to be repeated, then, rather than condemning Israel, the world should be directing its anger at Hezbollah and at the Syrian and Iranian regimes that support it.

Terrorists are fanatics, but they are not idiots. If the terrorist tactic of using human shields helps them achieve their goals, they will utilize it. If it undermines their goals, they will abandon it.

If we want to live in a world where civilians are never used as human shields, then we must create a world in which employing such measures results in the unequivocal condemnation of terrorists and in forceful action against them by the civilized world.

If the world were now blaming Hezbollah, Syria and Iran for the innocent Lebanese killed, hurt or displaced in this conflict, then it would be sending a powerful message to every terrorist group on the planet: We will not tolerate the use of human shields. Period.

Instead, those who condemn Israel have sent precisely the opposite message. They have told every terrorist group around the world that the use of human shields will pay huge dividends, thereby providing them with a powerful weapon that endangers innocents everywhere.

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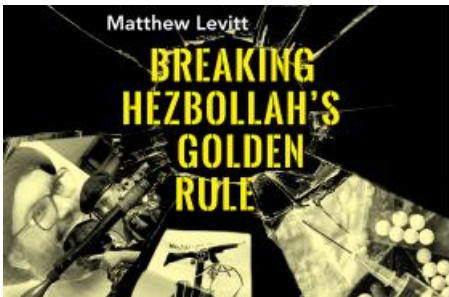
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