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Examining the Conduct of IDF Operations in Gaza

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Critics have raised serious ethical questions about how the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) carried out Operation Cast Lead in the Gaza Strip. The IDF has been accused of war crimes ranging from launching an unjustified and aggressive war to wanton damage to civilian property. The Israeli government and the IDF have countered these claims, and investigations of some of the complaints, including those of individual misconduct by Israeli soldiers, are already underway. Analysis of Cast Lead, however, indicates that this operation was limited in scope, duration, and intensity, and that Israel's conduct restricted the amount of damage inflicted on the civilian population as a whole.

Background

It should come as no surprise that this issue was raised, since any large-scale IDF operation in Gaza was bound to put civilian life and property at risk. The destructive power of modern weapons is substantial, even when employed precisely. Ground combat can be intense and lethal to soldiers and civilians alike, particularly in an uncertain and emotionally charged environment. Military operations are not antiseptic events conducted in a vacuum; today, where irregular and asymmetric warfare is common, the lines between the civilian and military sectors are increasingly blurred, complicating military operations and increasing risks to civilians. The situation was further complicated by Israel's opponents -- Hamas and others -- who used the civilian population and property as cover for their offensive and defensive actions, including the booby-trapping of civilian housing and public buildings. But no reasonable observer of Cast Lead would have expected the operation to be free of violence to the civilian community in Gaza; civilians were going to be killed and wounded, and their property destroyed and damaged.

Strategic and Operational Aspects

Charges against Israel's conduct during the war give the impression of an unrestrained campaign against an undefended population. Some have suggested that the IDF deliberately and systematically inflicted excessive violence on Gaza's civilian population. In other words, the IDF, both as an organization and as individuals, directed the war against innocent civilians and those seeking to aid them. In the words of a UN report, Cast Lead was ". . . a massive assault on a densely populated urbanized setting where the defining reality could not but subject the entire civilian population to an inhumane form of warfare . . ." (author's emphasis). Analysis of the conduct of operations, however, paints a different picture. At the strategic level, it is evident that Cast Lead was an operation with limited political and military objectives -- too limited, in fact, for many Israeli critics of Ehud Olmert's government. The operation did not aim to overthrow or bring down the Hamas regime in Gaza (although it certainly intended to damage it), and it did not aim to reoccupy the entire Gaza Strip.

Ground operations were narrowly focused, and air operations, while ranging widely across Gaza, were concentrated in the north and the south. In addition, the IDF employed only a fraction of the ground combat power available to it. In essence, only one reinforced division was used in Cast Lead: three paratroop/infantry brigades and one armored brigade, plus supporting artillery and special units such as engineering and intelligence. This hardly constituted a "massive assault." This force was employed only in the north; central and southern Gaza saw no significant -- if any -- ground combat. Even where ground forces were employed, fighting was not sustained. Some units saw little intense combat, as reflected in the very low Israeli combat casualties. No attempt was made to penetrate with ground forces deeply into populated areas, even where Hamas fighters were known to be located.

The IDF took active measures to reduce civilian casualties, including the extensive use of leaflets and phone messages warning Palestinians to leave the area or to avoid potential targets. Civilian warnings also included the Israeli Air Force (IAF) "knocking" actions -- shots fired to alert building inhabitants of an imminent attack. While the efficacy of these measures is questionable given the military situation, the IDF did attempt to mitigate the effect of its actions on civilians.

The Tactical Level

Complaints against the IDF have come from sources of varying credibility. UN reporters and other witnesses have claimed that the IDF employed weapons, tactics, and rules of engagement (ROE) that resulted in the killing and

wounding of civilians, and that these actions were, in some cases, "war crimes." Of course, the merit of any particular claim can be determined only by an investigation that considers what actually happened, the context, and the intentions of those involved. But without specifically addressing any individual claim, some important elements of the nature of the fighting need to be understood.

First, with respect to the use of aerial weapons, the IAF attacked a broad set of targets within Gaza, including leadership, infrastructure, smuggling tunnels, military facilities, roads, and rocket and mortar launch sites. These targets were not concentrated in designated military zones or areas, but often located near, next to, and within facilities that are normally civilian in purpose. There is good evidence that Hamas and other organizations made a conscious decision to place these targets in civilian areas. Israel chose to attack these targets and accepted the risk of collateral damage. But it did so with some substantial measure of accuracy. According to the IAF, 80 percent of the bombs used by the IAF were precision weapons, and 99 percent of the air strikes hit their targets. The extensive use of these weapons (up from 36 percent in the 2006 Lebanon War, according to the IDF) made the attacks more effective and probably reduced civilian losses. Nevertheless, civilian lives were lost and civilian property damaged.

Where ground combat occurred, the localized effects were often severe. Modern ground combat systems, and associated systems such as attack helicopters, are highly destructive. The IDF has not released its ROE for Cast Lead, but it seems evident that a high value was placed on protecting the lives of IDF soldiers. IDF ground commanders acknowledged this from the beginning of the operation, and it led directly to the use of heavy firepower against targets. Israeli sources also report that some low-level IDF commanders urged their troops to act aggressively and not take risks in dealing with suspect threats. Hamas and other combatants were interspersed with the civilian population, first as matter of choice for cover and concealment, and later out of perceived necessity to escape IDF fire. Palestinian fighters reportedly operated from within civilian dwellings, schools, and mosques, and used ambulances to transport combatants. Israeli sources report that Shifa hospital was used by Hamas as a command center for its senior leadership throughout the conflict. In addition, Hamas had trained youths and women for combat and suicide missions, and advertised this capability broadly. These actions further contributed to the uncertainty as to who was and was not a combatant in Gaza. For innocent civilians, this sometimes was a lethal environment.

IDF measures to protect its soldiers undoubtedly translated into additional destruction or damage to civilian property — tactics that included using bulldozers and other armored vehicles to clear axes of advance, breaking through exterior and interior walls of structures to avoid exposure to observation and fire, and clearing rooms for use by IDF personnel. These measures, though, were taken in response to Hamas's preparation of the battlefield with mines and improvised explosive devices intended to impede Israeli movement and inflict casualties, as well as to the group's tactical employment of snipers and antitank weapons. In effect, Hamas had already prepared the civilian environment for military purposes. IDF commanders felt it was an acceptable trade-off to open an approach through civilian houses or greenhouses rather than risk being ambushed and taking losses.

Conduct of War vs. Conduct of Soldiers

The issues concerning IDF treatment of Palestinian lives and property are being used by some critics to argue that IDF soldiers were motivated by racism or religiously inspired fervor against the Palestinians, and that the IDF devalued Palestinian life, as demonstrated by the nature of Cast Lead, the aggressive tactics and weapons employed by the IDF, and its allegedly loose ROE. These arguments are similar to some assertions by historians that the U.S. conducted a racist war against the Japanese during World War II. These arguments are flawed, however, in that they conflate the "conduct of war," the objectives, plans, and operations that are carried out, with the "experience of war," the conduct of individual soldiers. In the case of Cast Lead, it is clear that the Palestinian population was not the target. In other words, Cast Lead was not conducted with the aim of killing civilians and damaging their property, although Palestinian civilians were killed and property destroyed as a consequence of military operations.

The "experience of war" refers to what individual soldiers did, saw, heard, and thought. Obviously, the experience of individuals can vary enormously in an operation on the scale of Cast Lead. Soldiers sometimes do terrible things, and this is true of all armies at all times, but this does not excuse criminal conduct and breakdowns in discipline. So far, there have been only a few cases of alleged serious misconduct involving the "cold-blooded" killing of civilians, and these are in dispute. Some Israeli soldiers were none too gentle in their treatment of civilian property, but others exercised consideration. The IDF, for its own good, needs to investigate the serious allegations carefully -- even more so if they point to systemic problems in discipline, training, or the climate in specific units.

Conclusion

The criticism leveled against the IDF raises a broader issue: to what standard should the armed forces of states be held when they are in conflict with nonstate actors operating from within a civilian population. Certainly, these standards should be high, but they cannot be so high as to prevent states from acting in legitimate self-defense. Hamas and other Palestinian terrorist organizations put the Palestinian population of Gaza at risk, often deliberately. Israel responded with an operation that in its essential elements was limited. To be sure, Israel had its own reasons for keeping its operation limited, but the overall effect was to reduce the consequences, harsh as they were, for the civilian population.

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