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Hamas have themselves to blame

Hamas have exploited human rights rhetoric to depict Israel as the villain in this crisis. But they have only themselves to blame

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The current round in the decades-long Arab-Israeli conflict began in mid-December when Hamas, who control Gaza, ended a six-month ceasefire. Missile attacks resumed against cities in the southern third of Israel, killing and wounding many civilians. After diplomatic efforts to halt the aggression failed, no Israeli leader could avoid acting in self-defence.

The response began with air strikes against rocket storage areas, smuggling tunnels from Egypt and leading Hamas commanders responsible for the deaths of Israelis. One week later, ground forces entered to destroy weapons and production facilities located in and around mosques, schools, hospitals, and densely-crowded neighborhoods.

These events are only the latest in the world's most difficult ethno-religious-national conflict. For over 60 years, Israel has faced bitter opposition and frequent attacks – from Egypt, under Colonel Nasser in the 1950s and '60s; from the PLO led by Yassir Arafat; and now from an Islamic coalition led by Iran, and linked to Hizbollah in Lebanon and to Hamas in Gaza. Hamas is the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood – the Islamist organization that, among other violent acts, was responsible for the assassination of President Sadat of Egypt in 1981. Their objective is clear – to end Jewish sovereignty and self-determination by “wiping Israel off the map.”

The buildup to the current fighting started in 2005 with the full Israeli withdrawal from Gaza, hoping that the end of the occupation resulting from the 1967 war would provide a start towards peace. However, in 2007 Hamas took power from the Fatah faction in a violent coup, and prepared the confrontation with Israel, using the ceasefire to acquire hundreds of Iranian supplied Grad rockets, increasing the lethal range from 13 to 40 kilometers.

In planning this war, the Hamas leadership followed the model used by Hizbollah in 2006. That conflict began with the killing and kidnapping of a number of soldiers, and the northern third of Israel was bombarded by missile attacks from Lebanon. When the war ended with the missiles still flying, over 150 Israeli deaths, Hizbollah's leadership intact, and a weak European-led UN force, they were able to claim victory.

In contrast, Israel was determined to prevent future conflicts by correcting the failures of the 2006 war.

In Lebanon and Gaza, as in earlier confrontations, the propaganda war has been central to the outcome. The 2002 Israeli operation in Jenin that followed Palestinian mass terror attacks was accompanied by false claims of a “massacre,” and allegations of “war crimes” and “disproportionality.” This pattern was repeated in the 2006 war with Hizbollah. The rhetoric of international law was used as a weapon, and the United Nations human rights bodies—dominated by such human rights stalwarts as Iran and Libya—joined in the one-sided attacks against Israel. Mass marches were organized in European cities, and Israel-obsessed radicals on European campuses sought to impose boycotts. Ideological non-governmental organisations (NGOS) with huge budgets, such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, joined dozens of Palestinian Solidarity groups in supporting the soft-power warfare, while violations of the human rights of Israeli civilians were ignored or justified.

The same strategy has been followed by Hamas, in the expectation that international pressure - led by NGOs and based on exploitation of human rights rhetoric and the language of international law - would force Israel to stop short. A ceasefire would then allow Hamas to rebuild its arsenal and extend the range of missile even further, to include Tel Aviv – the center of the Israeli economy.

The key to this scenario and a Hamas victory is international pressure on Israel based on the soft power. Here again, the publicity generated by NGO superpowers—Oxfam, Amnesty, and the numerous pro-Palestinian groups—play a central role. For months, these organizations have ignored the missile attacks from Gaza and use of human shields by Hamas in schools and mosques used to launch missiles. They campaigned against what they refer to as an Israeli policy of “collective punishment” and promoted allegations of a “humanitarian crisis.”

But the reality is quite different: the images of a power shortage and photos of Palestinians reading by candle light were staged, and the Israeli Defence Force stated last week that the World Food Program has halted food shipments to Gaza because storage facilities are overflowing. Under Hamas, Gaza’s main industry became the import and manufacture of rockets and mortars – over 6,000 have been used against Israel. Had these resources been devoted to peaceful endeavors, including the use of agricultural facilities built by Israel, life in Gaza could have been entirely different.

Thus, while many well-intentioned human rights campaigners blame Israel and call for an end to the fighting, the organisations to which they belong share the moral responsibility for this tragedy and loss of life. A ceasefire that only prepares the way for the next and more deadly round will accomplish nothing. To make a lasting and moral difference, the double standards and deep prejudices that have eroded the essential universality of human rights, and allowed leaders of groups like Hamas to expect “victories,” must also end.

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