**Decreasing International Support of Hamas will Lead to a Cessation of the Current Hostilities in Gaza**

The events of the past weeks – rising tensions in Gaza, Hamas’ attempts to escalate the conflict with Israel, and the condemnations leveled against Israel from various countries – once again demonstrate how difficult and complex it is for democratic countries to combat terror.

When a sovereign state takes measures against another sovereign state, clear rules of engagement apply as stipulated by international law. In such cases, the identities of citizen and soldier are clear, and the battlefield is defined. By contrast, in a conflict between a sovereign state and a terror organization, the latter uses the civilian population as a chess piece, disregarding international law and believing that the ends always justify the means.

Hamas’ goal is to instigate unrest in order to raise international awareness of the Palestinian cause. It also seeks internal Palestinian approbation and support, in its continuing fight against the authority of, PA President, Mahmoud Abbas as well as support from Arab states. To achieve its goals, Hamas intentionally uses the civilian population. This includes encouraging protesters to burn tires, which harms the Gazan population with smoke poisoning, and sending Palestinian civilians – including women and children, and even the physically disabled – to the security barrier, knowing all too well that they are likely to be harmed or worse.

Israel’s primary obligation as a democratic state is to ensure the security of the state and its citizens. Israel has therefore set red lines against these Palestinian demonstrators, in an attempt to deter Hamas. It goes without saying that alongside this, is the obligation of maintaining the state’s democratic character and moral high ground, requiring Israel to try to diminish harm to innocents on the opposing side. It seems that this is precisely what Israel is striving to do. According to IDF spokesman Brigadier General Ronen Manalis, the IDF used crowd control measures and live fire in accordance with open-fire regulations. Nevertheless, and because during the confrontation Palestinian civilians, portrayed as underdogs, were killed, Israel is being condemned by many countries.

The international community must realize that it is Hamas which is responsible for the deaths of civilians in Gaza. The organization intentionally violates The Principle of Distinction which lies at the core of international law and which requires combatants to distinguish between soldiers and civilians in order to ensure that innocents do not come to harm. Hamas, as mentioned, intentionally blurs the lines between terrorists and civilians. It sends not only “innocent” civilians to the security barrier but also terrorists, who embed themselves among protesters. The fact is that these protests are not quiet; under the cover of riots are attempts to harm Israeli soldiers with explosives and Molotov cocktails, as well as attempts to approach and breach the security barrier in order to invade Israel.

These terror operatives do not wear uniforms or bear any identifying marks to distinguish themselves from the Palestinian civilian population – a requirement of soldiers according to international law. An Israeli soldier required to act in the face of violent protests has difficulty making a split-second decision whether to treat an individual as a civilian or a terrorist. Misidentification and the killing of a civilian will lead directly to international condemnation despite the fact that the responsibility for the mistake falls on Hamas. In addition, civilians who are not self-declared terrorists but are nevertheless sent to the fence are used, in effect, as human shields. It seems that most of the protesters have volunteered to take an active part in the violent protests; some are even paid by Hamas in exchange for their participation. There are divergent interpretations in international law as to the proper response in such a case. One approach maintains that when a civilian chooses to take an active role in hostilities, of his own free will, he loses his immunity as a citizen and may be attacked.

Even if many consider its cause to be just, the time has come for Hamas to be subjected to condemnation for its premeditated use of violent and dangerous actions and its intentional endangerment of the citizens under its control during demonstrations portrayed as civilian in nature. Only when Hamas (and those segments of the Palestinian population which support violence) realizes that the sympathy shown towards it is decreasing, and that there is no international support or recognitions of its attempts to reach its goals, will it be possible to reduce the number of such violent protests.

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