



# The War against Civilians

By Ilan Troen '63

A faculty member and Middle East scholar living in the Negev offers a view from the Israeli home front.

The Gaza Strip is one of two home fronts in this nasty and unwanted war. There is ample and disturbing evidence, shown daily in fearful living color on televised news and Internet videos, of the terrible suffering of civilians in Gaza. The Israeli Air Force (IAF) and ground forces have been hitting relentlessly at the Hamas military infrastructure, and there are also civilian casualties. Although civilians are often warned prior to attacks, by leaflets dropped by the IAF and even phone calls made by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), there is enormous anguish involved in people having to flee their homes under fire, often uncertain as to where to go and how to get away. Israelis are not oblivious to this. The suffering of Palestinian civilians and ways to mitigate it are topics of continual public debate and government activity.

But it has by now also become clear that Hamas is using Gaza's civilians as human shields, and that homes, schools, and even mosques have been turned into armories and

launching sites for missiles. A vast labyrinthine network of tunnels has been dug under Gaza, used for smuggling armaments, explosives, and personnel from across the border with Egypt and also into Israel. Hamas painstakingly and deliberately built these vast underground battlefields in civilian areas. They did not provide their citizens with bomb shelters or safe zones for the battle they themselves were preparing to initiate. This enormous superstructure is dedicated to destroying Israelis—that includes me, my family, and my friends. So much good might have been accomplished had even a fraction of these resources and energies been used to develop an economic and cultural infrastructure to benefit the Palestinian people.

But there is also another home front, one that is less photographed and appears less dramatic on TV and video screens. It is, for all that, no less real. A native Bostonian, I have made my home in the northern Negev for more than three decades. Following my winter break in Israel, I recently returned to Brandeis,

Photography by Yehoshua Halevi '83

where I teach Israel studies. I want to share what my home front is like as a way of explaining a sometimes-ignored dimension of what this war is about.

When we built our home in 1976 on a patch of desert, just north of Beer Sheva toward the Judean hills and Hebron, the zoning ordinance required us to include a bomb shelter with all walls and the ceiling of at least one-half meter of reinforced concrete and a heavy metal door. At the same time, in a place that was probably never cultivated before in history, we planted olive, pomegranate, lemon, grapefruit, and kumquat trees, and an abundance of plants and flowers. That has been the setting in which we have brought up our children.

This shelter is where my wife and I, our two daughters and sons-in-law, our son, and eight of our grandchildren spent New Year's Eve 2008 after a siren warned us we had sixty seconds to find shelter from yet another missile attack. It's true we are personally fortunate. No home in our own community has (yet) been hit. But this "routine" takes a real toll. Our grandchildren, from eighteen months to twenty years old, have been out of school since the Hanukkah vacation began in late December. The decision to close kindergartens, schools, and university and college campuses and disallow any public gatherings proved fortunate.

One of the first Grad missiles to hit Beer Sheva exploded at a kindergarten; another went off at the high school where two of our children were students and where our son-in-law taught. Our daughter and son-in-law had to stop their car by the side of the road and run with their eighteen-month-old son to a ditch

family from Galilee who could no longer risk the danger from missiles at their own home.

I concluded my military service in the IDF reserves around 1990 as a member of Civil Defense. During the previous decade, we learned how to jack up concrete slabs from buildings destroyed by bombs, to extricate victims, and to protect civilians from chemical and biological warfare. We were warned then that while the army was largely preparing for conflict on the battlefield with enemy armies, it was likely we were about to enter an era in which the conflict would be waged behind the lines, on the home front. The first Gulf War, when we wore gas masks as Scud missiles hit targets largely in and around Tel Aviv and Ramat-Gan, was our first experience of this new reality. Modern warfare was being deliberately directed against civilians, not only in Israel.

The assault on the Twin Towers, the bomb attacks in Madrid and London, and the suicide attacks on the buses of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv may have been harbingers of the world in which we now live. Every time you take off your shoes and go through a scanner to get on a plane suggests that the front lines may be everywhere and anywhere. For Israelis this has not been an abstraction for several decades. Targeting Israeli civilians is a well-practiced strategy with increasing ferocity, with sophistication, and, now, with the legitimacy that comes from sacred, religious texts.

Seven thousand-plus missiles ago, the Hamas began by hurling primitive Katyusha rockets on Sderot and in other border settlements within easy range, exploding buildings; injuring, maiming, killing, and terrifying men, women, and children; and

**For me and my countrymen, there is a sense of "no choice" in fighting this war.  
The success rate in calling up the reserves was more than 100 percent.**

where they lay over him and covered their heads with their hands; there, they listened to four loud explosions, but were unharmed. They were on their way to the pediatrician. Luckily they got there before the next siren sounded, and they were able to reach the public shelter. We have had other close calls and many other runs to the shelter, almost daily, from first thing in the morning until well after midnight.

It was not the first time we had used our shelter. During the first Gulf War we sought refuge from Saddam Hussein's Scuds. It was worse then. We were then instructed to wear gas masks. During the last war with the allies of Hamas, the Hezbollah of Lebanon, we housed for more than a month a three-generation

making it nearly impossible to live. Longer-range Katyushas then reached even deeper inside Israel's rather narrow territory. In the past weeks they've used (and revealed) an arsenal of Grad missiles that make it possible for Hamas to target our home and all homes and institutions forty kilometers from the border with Gaza and farther still from the launching pads. Vast numbers of these rockets, not locally made, are regularly smuggled into Gaza to be used on civilian, not military, targets. This last point is crucial.

We are not willing to turn the other cheek any longer to this constantly menacing threat, or to accept deliberately random acts of terror practiced with increasing virulence and cynicism as a normal



part of everyday life, as merely part of our “routine.” Hamas decreed on December 19 it would not renew the temporary truce (Ta’hdya or calm) that could have led toward coexistence with Israel. It would have been immoral not to respond to their renewal of terror in the form of rockets fired at the real people living in Israeli cities and towns.

For me and most of my countrymen, there is a sense of “no choice” in fighting this war. The success rate in calling up the reserves was more than 100 percent. That is, many who did not receive the call—the famous “Order No. 8”—volunteered to take part.

Our youngest son, born in Beer Sheva, had the privilege of attending courses for a semester at Brandeis before beginning his service in the IDF, where he trained as a paramedic. He chose this service, he said, because he “would like to save lives, rather than take them.” He is now attached to an armored unit in Gaza.

Abe called us several times before he entered Gaza to ask if we were OK, after hearing that rockets had fallen in our area. On his last leave he even shared the shelter with us civilians. I can only imagine how he and his comrades, from the inside, view the conflict now taking place. I believe they will be protective of the lives of the innocent civilians among whom

Hamas fighters, waiting to kill or, if possible, kidnap them, are embedded. The IDF’s job is daunting.

We know this is a war we must win. Winning means reducing the capacity of Hamas in transforming their territory into a launching site for weapons designed to destroy our families and our society.

The Hamas is not a military force designed for warfare on the conventional battlefield. Their targets are civilian areas, with attacks originating from their own civilian heartland. The only way out for us is to excise or contain this cancer before it destroys further its own host as well as its neighbors. Hamas has yet to forswear its goals or methods.

Their version of Islamic theology is fundamentally anti-Semitic, likening Jews to pigs and apes, and surely unworthy of independence and equality in the world they define as the “Abode of Islam.” Reluctantly, my own conclusion is that it is far better to allow Israel to contain and neutralize this virulent fundamentalism now. Otherwise, I expect I will be back in my bomb shelter together with my family yet another time, with results that could be even more catastrophic on all home fronts.

*Ilan Troen '63, director of Brandeis's Schusterman Center for Israel Studies, holds the Stoll Chair in Israel Studies.*