[The Pointless Battle of the Gaza War Reports](https://www.commentarymagazine.com/2015/06/15/the-pointless-battle-gaza-war-reports/)

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It’s not likely that many of Israel’s critics will pay much attention to [the report issued on Sunday by the country’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs](http://mfa.gov.il/ProtectiveEdge/Documents/2014GazaConflictFullReport.pdf) about last summer’s war in Gaza. Nor will they take notice of [a separate report compiled by a multinational group of retired generals and admirals](http://blog.unwatch.org/index.php/2015/06/12/key-findings-of-the-high-level-international-military-group-on-the-gaza-conflict/) on the conflict that was submitted to the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) last week. Both of these reports say the Israel Defense Forces acted in a largely exemplary fashion during the 50 days of conflict. They conclude that charges of war crimes against the Israelis are false and that the primary responsibility for the entire conflict and the toll of civilian casualties belongs to the Hamas terrorists who started the Gaza war and used the population in the strip as human shields. Instead, Israel-bashers will wait for the report of the UNHRC, which is likely to condemn the IDF. But the problem here goes deeper than dueling reports from two parties — Israel and the HRC — whose bias is not in doubt. The battle over the reports provides a microcosm of the entire conflict precisely because the facts are irrelevant to the debate. It doesn’t matter how much care the IDF takes to avoid hurting noncombatants. If, like the HRC and other Israel-haters, you don’t think the Jewish state has a right to exist or to defend itself, everything it does is illegitimate. By the same token, it doesn’t matter how culpable Hamas is, their crimes are always going to be rationalized or even justified by those determined to smear Israel.

The MFA report, like that of the group of foreign military leaders, examined the conflict soberly and admitted that, as in every war, there were plenty of mistakes made in the heat of battle. Though the rules of engagement for allowing a strike on a specific target in Gaza involved a formidable list of assurances that civilians were not put at risk, there are always going to be instances in which circumstances change in the short period between authorization of firing and when the shells land. Moreover, it is not always possible to distinguish between armed combatants and civilians when Hamas fighters are doing everything possible to blend in with their human shields. That is why, contrary to Hamas propaganda mimicked by much of the international press, sought to deny that nearly half of the Palestinians killed were actually terrorist personnel. Sometimes those who are warned to leave areas about to come under attack don’t do so (often at the demands of Hamas). Sometimes fire is inaccurate. But despite the attempt of Israel-haters to portray the IDF as bloodthirsty, even those incidents that were clearly errors cannot be said to be the result of deliberate action. Sometimes soldiers just make a mistake, as happens in every war in history.

It should be remembered that General Martin Dempsey, the chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, [said last year](http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/volokh-conspiracy/wp/2014/11/10/joint-chiefs-chairman-dempsey-undermines-obama-administration-criticism-of-israeli-actions-in-gaza/) that the conduct of the IDF was a model for Americans forces to follow in their own fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan. As these reports make clear, there isn’t a military in the world that is forced to observe such restrictive rules of engagement when fighting terrorists.

Nor should it be forgotten that the context of the Gaza war is not one in which Israel launched an unprovoked attack on innocents. To the contrary, the chain of events that led to war began with the kidnapping and murder of three Israeli teenagers by a Hamas cell. The Hamas rulers of Gaza then escalated the conflict by firing thousands of rockets on Israeli cities and towns. They also attempted to use terror tunnels dug under the international border between Israel and Gaza to kidnap and murder other Israeli civilians.

Hamas runs what is for all intents and purposes an independent Palestinian state in all but name in Gaza. But its conduct in the war consisted of acts of terrorism as well as war crimes against its own people because of its decision to launch missiles and conduct attacks against Israelis in the vicinity of civilians. Its leadership hid in secure bunkers under hospitals that Israel did not attack. Though, unlike Israelis, the people of Gaza had few places to which they could flee for safety, there were plenty of shelters in the strip. But those shelters were for Hamas’s bombs and fighters, not ordinary Palestinians.

The reports from the ministry and the generals contain plenty of important information and they should be read. But like the expected attack on Israel from the HRC (which devotes a vastly disproportionate amount of its time on Israel while ignoring real human rights tragedies elsewhere), they are almost beside the point.

[As the Times of Israel rightly points out,](http://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-shifts-to-offense-ahead-of-un-report-on-gaza-war/) the purpose of the Israeli report may in part be to head off a specious investigation of the war by the International Criminal Court (though Hamas would more to fear from a fair inquiry than Israel).

But those legal details are unfortunately not going to influence the battle for international opinion. The plain fact is that those who think Hamas has the right to shoot at Israeli civilians and consider it bad form that the Jewish state takes so much trouble to protect its people actually aren’t interested in the facts about the fighting. It doesn’t matter to them that no other country in the world would seek to stop attacks on its cities with the degree of care that Israel demonstrates. Nor does it matter that the point of Hamas’s “resistance” is not to adjust the border in the West Bank but to destroy Israel.

By any rational standard, Israel’s effort to stop Hamas missile fire and tunnels was a just war. But if you think Israelis deserve to be killed simply because they are Israelis and that the Jews are the one people in the world not entitled to a state or its defense, then it doesn’t matter how hard the IDF tries to save Palestinian lives. Such bias has a name and it applies to those who hold such views whether they are Arabs or Jews: anti-Semitism. That and not the details of the reports about Gaza is what will continue to drive the debate about the war.