

Defending Israel's Attacks on Civilians—A Harbinger for Clinton's Presidency?

A fight is brewing as Democrats prepare to [debate U.S. policy on Israel](#) at their national convention in July. Bernie Sanders' appointees to the platform committee Cornel West and James Zogby plan to challenge the party establishment's uncritical support for an increasingly aggressive, right wing Israeli government.

While the large-scale civilian casualties inflicted by the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) in military operations in recent years have raised concerns both within Israel and internationally, Hillary Clinton—the almost-certain Democratic nominee for President—has repeatedly gone on record defending the IDF's conduct. Not only has she failed to even once raise concerns about the thousands of civilian deaths inflicted by Israeli forces, she has been a harsh critic of human rights organizations and international jurists who have.

Going well beyond the normal “pro-Israel” rhetoric expected of American politicians, she has defended Israeli attacks on heavily-populated civilian areas as legitimate self-defense against terrorism, even in cases where the Obama administration and members of Congress—including Sanders—have raised objections.

Her statements raise serious questions as to what kind of rules of engagement she would support for U.S. forces in the “War on Terror.”

As Secretary of State, Clinton took the lead in blocking any action by the United Nations in response to a [2009 report](#) by the UN Human Rights Council which—like previous reports by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and other groups—documented war crimes by both Israel and Hamas.

When Israeli forces attacked a UN school housing refugees in the Gaza Strip in July 2014, killing dozens of civilians, [Sanders](#) condemned it as “terribly, terribly wrong” and the [U.S. State Department](#) issued a statement saying that it was “appalled” by the “disgraceful” shelling. By contrast, Clinton—when asked about the attack during an interview with [The Atlantic](#)—refused to criticize the massacre. She argued that since Hamas had begun the conflict by firing rockets into civilian-populated areas of Israel, the Israeli government was therefore not legally or morally culpable for killing Palestinian civilians, claiming that “the ultimate responsibility” for the deaths at the school “has to rest on Hamas and the decisions it made.”

In reality, however wrong Hamas indeed was, such actions simply do not absolve Israel of its responsibility under [international humanitarian law](#) for the far greater civilian deaths its armed forces have inflicted on Palestinians in Gaza. Indeed, it has long been a principle of Western jurisprudence that someone who is the proximate cause of a crime cannot claim innocence simply because of the influence of another party. For example, if someone starts a bar fight and the person he punches ends up shooting him and a group of innocent bystanders, the shooter cannot claim innocence because the other guy initiated the conflict.

Similarly, when asked in an interview about the nearly 1500 civilians killed by Israeli forces during the 2014 war on the Gaza Strip, [Clinton](#) insisted, “I think Israel did what it had to do to respond to Hamas rockets,” which were responsible for six civilian deaths. When, during [a debate](#) prior to the New York primary, Sanders pushed her to acknowledge that Israel used disproportionate force during that military campaign, she responded “You have a right to defend yourself,” even though Sanders was not disputing that. She insisted the civilian

deaths were because of “the way that Hamas places its weapons” and that Hamas “often has its fighters in civilian garb.” However, [independent human rights investigators](#) found very few of the Palestinian civilian deaths were a result of such actions. More than 500 of the civilians killed were children and hundreds more were trapped inside buildings nowhere near Hamas military operations.

Following reports by [Amnesty International](#), [Human Rights Watch](#), and other investigators documenting war crimes committed by both Hamas and Israeli forces that summer, Clinton [condemned](#) what she referred to as “this enormous international reaction against Israel, and Israel’s right to defend itself, and the way Israel has to defend itself. This reaction is uncalled for and unfair.”

Such a callous attitude towards civilian deaths is not new or restricted to territories controlled by Hamas. In 2002, during an Israeli military offensive in the West Bank, [Amnesty International](#) reported:

In response, Sen. Clinton introduced [a resolution](#) in the Senate saying the IDF’s actions were “necessary steps to provide security to [Israel’s] people by dismantling the terrorist infrastructure in the Palestinian areas.”

During the 2006 Israeli military offensive in Lebanon, [Human Rights Watch](#) criticized the “systematic failure by the IDF to distinguish between combatants and civilians,” noting how “in dozens of attacks, Israeli forces struck an area with no apparent military target. In some cases, the timing and intensity of the attack, the absence of a military target, as well as return strikes on rescuers, suggest that Israeli forces deliberately targeted civilians.”

Again, Clinton co-sponsored [a Senate resolution](#) unconditionally defending Israel’s conduct during the 35-day conflict, which resulted in the deaths of more than 800 Lebanese civilians. Though Hezbollah rocket attacks on Israel did not commence until after Israel began its bombing campaign, Clinton [responded](#) to those expressing concerns about civilian casualties by saying, “If extremist terrorists were launching rocket attacks across the Mexican or Canadian border, would we stand by or would we defend America against these attacks from extremists?”

In attempting to justify such illegal conduct, Clinton is not just trying to appear to be “pro-Israel.” Israelis themselves, through such organizations as the human rights groups [B’Tselem](#) and the veterans group [Breaking the Silence](#), have also been highly critical of the IDF’s attacks on non-combatants.

Clinton’s posture may be more of a reflection of her lack of respect for international humanitarian law, her apparent belief that attacking civilian-populated areas is legitimate self-defense if done in the name of fighting terrorism, and a perceived need to discredit those who say otherwise. And, since [she has frequently linked](#) Israeli and American fights against terrorism, she may be laying the groundwork as president to use the same tactics.

Having called for an escalated U.S. military response to ISIS in Iraq and Syria, Clinton as President might use a similar rationale to order massive U.S. air strikes on Mosul, Raqqa, and other Islamic State-controlled cities, regardless of civilian casualties.

That prospect is far more worrisome than a divisive platform fight over Israel at the Democratic convention in July.

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