



## PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

# Israeli Civil Defense: A Critical Tactic, but a Poor Strategy

by Maj. (res.) Elliot Chodoff

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,373, December 16, 2019

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Civil defense is a critical tactic that reduces civilian casualties during wartime. However, it is insufficient as a strategy with which to defeat an enemy. Israel has shifted in its use of civil defense from a protective tactic while the IDF achieves battlefield victory to a strategy of restraint that allows the enemy to launch attacks that cause few if any lethal casualties without fear of a devastating response. This is a dangerous development.

Britain introduced the concept of military civil defense after the German bombings of civilian areas during WWI. The threat of aerial attack on civilians, a tactic advocated by air war proponents, prompted the further development of civil defense countermeasures that were tested and refined under fire during WWII by Britain, Germany, and Japan. Other countries, like the US, developed civil defense institutions and methods in anticipation of possible attack. After WWII, the threat of nuclear war prompted further development of civil defense.

In all these cases, however, civil defense was seen as a means of protecting civilians from attack while military forces fought to defeat the enemy. Ultimate protection of the civilian population was to be achieved through military victory.

When the State of Israel was established, bomb shelters and civilian evacuation from combat zones were used to protect civilians while the IDF fought on the battlefield. Because victory could take time to achieve, it was imperative that the civilian population be protected.

In 1991, Israel faced a new phenomenon: a threat to civilians against which the IDF had no effective military response. Iraqi SCUD missiles could only be confronted via civil defense tactics: directives for the civilian population to maximize survival rates, coupled with a rudimentary ABM system of Patriot missiles. The IDF had no credible military method of stopping the attacks, and Israel was forced to await the defeat of Iraq by coalition forces.

In the wake of the 1991 Gulf War, Israel recognized that the threat of ballistic missiles coupled with the possible use of nuclear, biological or chemical (NBC) munitions exceeded the capabilities of existing civil defense units, and accordingly established the Home Front Command. Faced with the prospect of tens of thousands of potential casualties, the Home Front Command developed a doctrine to mitigate the effects of strategic attacks against the civilian population.

Terrorist organizations like Hezbollah and Hamas, through their acquisition of large quantities of rockets and missiles, have gained a significant capability to threaten Israeli civilians. The Second Lebanon War of 2006, coupled with an increasing rocket threat from Gaza, led to a shift in Israeli civil defense strategy from a critical adjunct of protecting civilians while the military defeated the enemy to an end in itself.

The IDF is thus no longer required to defeat the enemy. It is considered sufficient that civilian casualties be minimized through sirens, shelters, and anti-rocket systems like Iron Dome. Punitive air strikes designed more to signal displeasure than to cause serious damage substitute for warfighting meant to achieve even a tactical victory.

The tactic of protecting civilians has become a strategy. This is a serious strategic error.

There are three deleterious consequences to this policy: strategic, domestic, and international.

- **Strategic:** If Israeli strategy is based on deterrence, a civil defense strategy is counterproductive. Non-response to attacks emboldens the attacker and erodes deterrence. By reducing the real and perceived costs of enemy rocket fire (in part by only taking civilian deaths into account as a “cost”), Israel has consented to a new status quo that tolerates rocket fire into its territory. Attacks inside Israeli territory are consequential regardless of their results, but that message is lost when such attacks are tolerated without an adequate response.

A state that is perceived as weak is more likely to be attacked. Restraint rather than escalation in the face of attacks on civilians might appear prudent—but the attacker might interpret such inaction as fear or weakness and escalate attacks. This would result in its inflicting more damage on Israel and gaining popular support from its constituents. If the enemy is trained to expect few serious punitive costs when it strikes, it is likely to continue or even increase its attacks.

- **Domestic:** An attack on a state's territory erodes its sovereignty, violating the Weberian principle of the state's "monopoly on the use of violence within its borders." Israel is allowing its sovereignty to be degraded by discounting the value of attacks on its territory, particularly when such attacks cause neither casualties nor significant physical damage. While life is protected by civil defense, property and lifestyle routines are not, leading to the erosion of civilian morale and community resilience.
- **International:** The world at large has become accustomed to Israel's toleration of attacks on its civilians. Escalation by the enemy is often incremental, whether in terms of duration of the period of attacks, number of rockets fired, or casualties and damage severity. When attacks eventually escalate beyond the "tolerable" and Israel reacts militarily, that response is likely to elicit severe international criticism, as the foreign perception is likely to be that the incremental escalation did not justify the response.

Anti-missile systems have been thought to lead to arms races, a key concept precipitating the US-USSR ABM Treaty. Israeli civil defense strategy has led to a one-sided arms race with Hamas that will continue until the defense system can be overcome, as has already occurred on the Lebanese front with Hezbollah.

Relying on civil defense as a strategy only provides incentives for an enemy that has much to gain from attacks on Israeli civilians, regardless of the quantitative damage inflicted by those attacks. Ultimately, only an offensive strategy designed to convince the enemy that the benefits of an attack fall far short of its costs, or to eliminate the enemy's ability to inflict damage in the first place, will truly protect the civilian population.

*Maj. (res.) Elliot Chodoff is a strategic analyst and Executive Director of Israel Strategic Solutions. He is a PhD candidate in Political Science at Bar Ilan University.*