



Levy's Anti-IDF Argument Shows a Loss of Moral Direction

by Brig. Gen. (res.) Eran Ortal

Perspectives Paper No. 2,320, November 28, 2024

A response to "Israel Has 'The Most Moral Army,' Certainly Compared to the U.S.? Gaza Death Ratio Tells Another Story", Haaretz, 20.11.2024

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: In a recent column in *Haaretz*, Prof. Yagil Levy argues, based on a "fundamental comparison", that the IDF in its war in Gaza is not the moral army it claims to be. Levy's claim is absurd. According to his method, which is based on the ratio of our forces' casualties to those in the enemy population, sloppy fighting with many IDF casualties would constitute a morally virtuous approach to war. The following response addresses in detail the claims made by Levy, offers a different standard of reference, and argues that the numbers on which Levy relies actually indicate an especially high level of distinction between the enemy and those not involved in the war in Gaza.

In a recent column in Haaretz, Prof. Yagil Levy claims, based on a "fundamental comparison", that the IDF in its war in Gaza is not the moral army it purports to be. His claim is based on little evidence from the field and relies mainly on comparisons of numbers.

Levy's database is simple. As of October 2024, about 43,000 Gazans had been killed in the war (Hamas data), of whom about 17,000 were terrorists (IDF data). There were about 350 IDF casualties. According to Levy, the best way to assess an army's morality is to examine the ratio between soldiers and civilians killed. According to his calculations, the ratio in the current war is 68 Gazan civilians for every

soldier killed. This is a higher ratio than was the case in Operation Protective Edge in Gaza (2014) or in the American battle to capture Fallujah (2004). In Levy's opinion, this ratio indicates that the IDF "transferred the risk" to Gazan civilians more than Western armies have done in other cases.

Levy wishes to convey the impression that his conclusion is based on thorough research and is therefore well-founded. In practice, Levy's claim is absurd. Morality, according to Levy, is directly related to the extent of casualties suffered by the military force. In other words, preserving the lives of our fighters, to a certain extent, becomes a moral flaw. According to this logic, sloppy fighting that results in many casualties for our forces would reflect the IDF's moral virtue.

Levy's "morality index" is, of course, Hamas's wet dream. The enemy built a combat doctrine on the idea of using its own population as a giant human shield. Its strategy was based on the assumption that it could avoid defeat in the war it itself initiated on October 7 through three components: holding hostages to be used as bargaining chips; maximizing deaths among its own population; and maximizing casualties for the IDF.

The comparison to the battle of Fallujah, a small city compared to the densely populated Gaza Strip, is also out of place. The level of organization, planning, and preparation for battle by the rebels there was immeasurably lower than in Gaza, and there was a much more sparse civilian presence as most had fled the city before the battle. In general, it is very difficult to compare battles and numbers, due to both the unique local circumstances of individual battles and the nature of such wars. Numerical data in wars against subversive forces tend to be extremely unreliable. To Levy's credit, he emphasizes that he relies on Hamas data - data that has been proven false on multiple occasions.

How can one discuss the morality of combat tactics? Prof. Levy, in his usual fashion, treats war as a one-sided event, but this is of course a wrong view. It is of course worth taking into account comparisons of enemy strength and the risk posed to the soldiers.

In the 2016-2017 campaign to liberate Mosul, for example, a city in and around which about 1.8 million people lived, between 10,000 and 40,000 civilians were killed. The lower number was taken from [a West Point study](#), while the higher number is the estimate published [by the British Independent](#) on July 19, 2017. About a million people were displaced from their homes and about 1,200 fighters from

the coalition against ISIS were killed (and even as many as 8,200, according to the West Point study). The size of the ISIS force defending the metropolis was estimated at between 3,000 to 5,000 fighters. The numbers, as mentioned, are highly questionable. Still, let's assume that 3,000 ISIS fighters were killed in the battle (though it is more likely that many of them fled), and that only 30,000 civilians were killed in the battle (though the city was completely destroyed and ISIS prevented residents from fleeing). This would mean that for every terrorist fighter killed, the coalition forces (Iraqi forces led by the US military) killed about 10 civilians. In other words, in the campaign to liberate Mosul, the ratio of civilian deaths to enemy kills was 1/10. Even if we use the most conservative end of the estimates, 10,000 civilian deaths, the ratio would still be one enemy fighter to more than three civilians.

The lives of soldiers also have moral value. Twelve hundred coalition fighters killed in the battle for Mosul means almost one for every two enemy fighters. If we use the West Point numbers, the ratio would be reversed and stand at more than two coalition fighters for every enemy fighter.

In Gaza, the IDF faced a dense space that had been prepared for war for almost 20 years, and an organized military force that numbered about 40,000 Hamas fighters and thousands more from other organizations. This force continues to build itself up, recruiting more Gazans, as the war goes on. These are much more difficult conditions (speaking solely in terms of enemy strength, it is 10 times more difficult) than those faced by the liberators of Mosul. Under these extraordinarily difficult conditions, the IDF has managed, according to the numbers used by Levy, to harm no more than 1.5 civilians for every terrorist killed.

To substantiate the quantitative analysis, we will perform a “sanity check” on the numbers by turning to [a report from the Costs of War project of the Watson Institute at Brown University](#) from November 2019. The report examines casualties in the 15 years of the war in Iraq. The use of multi-year data can mitigate the distortions created by the extreme uncertainty of numbers from specific battles. According to the Watson report, in the Iraq War (2003-2018), about 200,000 civilians, 40,000 enemy combatants, and 50,000 coalition combatants (nearly 10,000 Americans and the rest local) were killed – that is, five civilians for every enemy combatant and a little more than one coalition combatant for every enemy combatant.

The IDF, according to Yagil Levy, "transferred the risk" to civilians. But the numbers actually indicate an impressive success of the IDF on both a tactical and a moral level. If the IDF had met the Mosul standard, between 51,000 and about 170,000 Gazans would have been killed in addition to the 17,000 terrorists killed (a ratio of between three and 10 civilians for every 17,000 terrorists). In reality – again, according to Levy, who is basing his conclusions on Hamas data – about 26,000 civilians were killed, about half the ratio of the extreme-lowest estimate for Mosul.

According to Levy's twisted index, in relation to the 17,000 terrorists killed, the IDF should have paid a price of between 8,500 and about 35,000 of its own casualties in order to meet the Mosul standard, or about 20,000 casualties to meet the overall standard of the Iraq War.

By the way, in the Kosovo War (1999), a war conducted by NATO from the air only, without risking ground forces, the studies indicate a ratio of between 1.4 and two civilians killed for every enemy combatant.

The data obtained by the IDF is not make-believe. [It is the fruit of enormous, long-term professional effort, and impressive tactical skill achieved in the midst of battle.](#) Systems of intelligence, air, and artillery support have been built in recent years for the benefit of the forces on the ground, as well as an extraordinary advanced system of warning and evacuating enemy populations – evacuations that are carried out at the cost of giving up surprise in battle. The IDF has reached a level of professionalism and skill in all these parameters that no army in the world has ever demonstrated before. Without delving into details, on a principled level, the IDF's moral choice was simple: to be strict about protecting the lives of enemy civilians through evacuations from the battlefield, and to protect the lives of our fighters through intelligence-based but also relatively permissive cover of fire support towards buildings and infrastructure that had become enemy entrenchment complexes.

The sight of a destroyed Gaza is not pretty. But Gaza is no more destroyed than Fallujah and Mosul after those battles, and a much lower ratio of Gazan civilians and IDF soldiers were killed in the process. In my opinion, destroying infrastructure is an entirely defensible moral choice in exchange for saving human lives.

Let's return to Levy's description of the war. He stresses that, unlike in the past, the IDF did not use the "roof-tapping" technique this time to warn residents before bombing buildings. He does not mention that this technique is unique to the IDF and has never been carried out by any other army anywhere else in the world. In the circumstances of this war, the "roof-tapping" technique was not a practical option. Levy also cites unflattering testimonies about IDF conduct. I believe some of the testimonies are true, and this is unfortunate and dangerous. We must fight against this kind of behavior and condemn the helplessness of IDF command in dealing with it. Unfortunately, in this cruel war, these occurrences are not surprising. But Levy does not describe the enormous effort made throughout the war to evacuate the non-combatant population from the battle zones and ensure evacuation routes and humanitarian aid for them prior to the entrance of the IDF. In Fallujah and Mosul, no one gave a thought to systematically moving supplies and fuel into enemy-controlled territory and ensuring the continuity of medical services there. Nor was any concern given to allowing the flow of water, electricity, cellular, or internet services.

This is not the first time Prof. Levy has launched an attack on the idea of tactical efficiency. About two years ago, he attacked Chief of Staff Aviv Kochavi, and me personally, for the effort that was then being made to improve the lethality of IDF forces - that is, their ability to locate an enemy and destroy him quickly and accurately. As Finkel has described, those efforts made an important contribution to the tactical success of the maneuver in Gaza. Levy denounced these efforts as "necrotactics" and accused the IDF of trying to prevent political agreements by improving Israel's military capability. Levy even [accused me](#) of striving for endless wars because my work, as an IDF officer at the time, was striving for a more decisive military capability that would deny the enemy the ability to fire at Israel.

The current war is not being conducted flawlessly. Far from it. We will have many lessons to learn from this long war, and not just from the failure of October 7. There is also room for criticism of deviations from the morality of warfare.

But that is not where Yagil Levy has directed his criticism. In his article in *Telem* in 2022 and again in his current column in *Haaretz*, for Levy, the enemy does not exist in war. The enemy is nothing more than a passive subject whom the IDF kills unilaterally and at will. The distorted measure of morality he presents is a denial of our right to self-defense, or at least of our right to fight to win.

Levy does not focus on specific incidents of moral excess that are proper to condemn. He chooses to use a broad moral index that purportedly gives him the right to condemn the morality of the war as a whole. In his view, the deaths of thousands of Gazans used deliberately by Hamas as human shields would be moral if thousands of IDF fighters were killed too.

The "Levy index" of morality requires careless and unsuccessful fighting on our part... that is, defeat. Well, Prof. Levy, the defensive war in Gaza is justified and moral. Fortunately, it is being carried out – at least generally and on a tactical level – in a professional and efficient manner. Your index's moral compass demands the shedding of more Israeli blood. Its practical meaning is the negation of the morality of defensive war. It is your index, not the IDF's conduct, that reflects the loss of a moral path.

[This article was published in *Zman Israel*](#)

*Brig. Gen. (res.) Eran Ortal recently retired from military service as commander of the Dado Center for Multidisciplinary Military Thinking. His book *The Battle Before the War* (MOD 2022, in Hebrew) dealt with the IDF's need to change, innovate and renew a decisive war approach. His next book, *Renewal - The October 7th War and Israel's Defense Strategy*, is about to be published by Levin Publications.*