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Israel's war in Gaza

Gaza: the rights and wrongs

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Israel was provoked, but as in Lebanon in 2006 it may find this war a hard one to end, or to justify

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THE scale and ferocity of the onslaught on Gaza have been shocking, and the television images of civilian suffering wrench the heart. But however deplorable, Israel's resort to military means to silence the rockets of Hamas should have been no surprise. This war has been a long time in the making.

Since Israel evacuated its soldiers and settlers from the Gaza Strip three years ago, Palestinian groups in Gaza have fired thousands of rudimentary rockets and mortar bombs across the border, killing very few people but disrupting normal life in a swathe of southern Israel. They fired almost 300 between December 19th, when Hamas ignored Egypt's entreaties and decided not to renew a six-month truce, and December 27th, when Israel started its bombing campaign (see [article](#)). To that extent, Israel is right to say it was provoked.

Of provocation and proportion

It is easy to point out from afar that barely a dozen Israelis had been killed by Palestinian rockets since the Gaza withdrawal. But few governments facing an election, as Israel's is, would let their towns be peppered every day with rockets, no matter how ineffective. As Barack Obama said on a visit to one Israeli town in July, "If somebody was sending rockets into my house where my two daughters sleep at night, I'm going to do everything in my power to stop that. And I would expect Israelis to do the same thing." In recent months, moreover, Hamas has smuggled far more lethal rockets into its Gaza enclave, some of which are now landing in Israeli cities that were previously out of range. On its border with Lebanon, Israel already faces one radical non-state actor, Hizbullah, that is formally dedicated to Israel's destruction and has a powerful arsenal of Iranian-supplied missiles at its disposal. The Israelis are understandably reluctant to let a similar danger grow in Gaza.

And yet Israel should not be surprised by the torrent of indignation it has aroused from around the world. This is not just because people seldom back the side with the F-16s. In general, a war must pass three tests to be justified. A country must first have exhausted all other means of defending itself. The attack should be proportionate to the objective. And it must stand a reasonable chance of achieving its goal. On all three of these tests Israel is on shakier ground than it cares to admit.

It is true that Israel has put up with the rockets from Gaza for a long time. But it may have been able to stop the

rockets another way. For it is not quite true that Israel's only demand in respect of Gaza has been for quiet along the border. Israel has also been trying to undermine Hamas by clamping an economic blockade on Gaza, while boosting the economy of the West Bank, where the Palestinians' more pliant secular movement, Fatah, holds sway. Even during the now-lapsed truce, Israel prevented all but a trickle of humanitarian aid from entering the strip. So although Israel was provoked, Hamas can claim that it was provoked too. If Israel had ended the blockade, Hamas may have renewed the truce. Indeed, on one reading of its motives, Hamas resumed fire to force Israel into a new truce on terms that would include opening the border.

On proportionality, the numbers speak for themselves—up to a point. After the first three days, some 350 Palestinians had been killed and only four Israelis. Neither common sense nor the laws of war require Israel to deviate from the usual rule, which is to kill as many enemies as you can and avoid casualties on your own side. Hamas was foolish to pick this uneven fight. But of the Palestinian dead, several score were civilians, and many others were policemen rather than combatants. Although both Western armies and their foes have killed far more civilians in Afghanistan and Iraq, Israel's interest should be to minimise the killing. The Palestinians it is bombing today will be its neighbours for ever.

This last point speaks to the test of effectiveness. Israel said at first that, much as it would like to topple Hamas, its present operation has the more limited aim of "changing reality" so that Hamas stops firing across the border. But as Israel learnt in Lebanon in 2006, this is far from easy. As with Hizbullah, Hamas's "resistance" to Israel has made it popular and delivered it to power. It is most unlikely to bend the knee. Like Hizbullah, it will probably prefer to keep on firing no matter how hard it is hit, daring Israel to send its ground forces into a messy street fight in Gaza's congested cities and refugee camps.

Now cease fire

Can Israel have forgotten the lesson of Lebanon so soon? Hardly. If anything, its campaign against Hamas now is intended to compensate for its relative failure against Hizbullah then. With Iran's nuclear threat on the horizon, and Iranian influence growing in both Lebanon and Gaza, Israel is keen to remind its enemies that the Jewish state can still fight and still win. Precisely for that reason, despite its talk of a long campaign, it may be more receptive than it is letting on to an immediate ceasefire. Its aircraft have already pummelled almost every target in Gaza. Further military gains will be harder. A truce now, if Hamas really did stop its fire, could be presented to voters as the successful rehabilitation of Israeli deterrence.

But a ceasefire needs a mediator. Mr Obama is not yet president, and George Bush has so far hung back, just as he did in 2006 while waiting for an Israeli knockout blow that did not come. This time, he and everyone else with influence should pile in at once. To bring Hamas on board, a ceasefire would need to include an end to Israel's blockade, but that would be a good thing in itself, relieving the suffering in Gaza and removing one of the reasons Hamas gives for fighting.

After that, Mr Obama will have to gather up what is left of diplomacy in the Middle East. It is not all hopeless. Until this week, Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian president, was talking to Israel about how to create a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza. But Mr Abbas presides over the West Bank only, and little progress is possible so long as half of Palestine's people support an organisation that can still not bring itself to renounce armed struggle or recognise Israel's right to exist. Since Hamas is not going to disappear, some way must be found to change its mind. Bombs alone will never do that.

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