It’s Time to Start Using the Term ‘Palestinian Civilian’ Correctly

written by Arsen Ostrovsky | 17.06.2024

Last week’s dramatic rescue of four Israeli hostages from Gaza included a shocking revelation: The hostages, who endued unbearable torture and constant threats of death, were held captive by Palestinian civilians in their home in central Gaza—including a journalist with bylines in Al Jazeera and his physician father. Amazingly, as soon the hostages were returned to Israeli soil, the operation was denounced by the usual suspects for the hundreds of “Palestinian civilians” it had claimed as casualties. The United Nations called the rescue operation a “war crime,” while EU Foreign Policy chief Josep Borrell called it a “bloodbath” and “massacre.” Naturally, the press reflexively parroted Hamas-run Gaza Health Ministry figures of purported casualties during the operation.

It’s a perfect opportunity for a long-overdue conversation about the use of the phrase “Palestinian civilian.”

Let’s get something straight from the outset: When you take hostages, you risk death. The moral and legal responsibility for any casualties resulting from the operation to free the hostages rests fully with Hamas and those holding hostages captive.

Under international law, it is a sacrosanct principle that civilians enjoy special protection, and the intentional targeting or harming of them during hostilities, is a grave war crime. But one should not need to be a legal scholar to understand that if you are a journalist or physician holding hostages, you are no longer a “civilian.” In fact, the Geneva Convention makes it unequivocally clear that civilians lose that protection when they take direct part in the hostilities.

In other words, when you hold hostages captive, you become a legitimate military target and should not be surprised when the Israel Defense Forces come knocking on your door.

And it wasn’t just these four hostages. In addition to the four Israeli hostages rescued from Nuseirat in central Gaza, there have been countless reports from hostages returning to Israel describing being held captive by ordinary Gazans,

including families, doctors, teachers, and even U.N. employees.

It is also well known that civilians in Gaza willingly joined Hamas en masse on October 7 and took part in the massacre, rapes, and abductions on that day.

How many Gazan “civilians” helped Hamas move and store rockets? How many “civilians” offered up their homes to hold hostages captive or keep guard to make sure they did not escape? How many have been the willing accomplices and collaborators of Hamas in the worst massacre and crimes against the Jewish people since the Holocaust?

These questions are crucial. Yet the international community is failing to ask these questions.

Instead, lawmakers, journalists and diplomats are blindly accepting reported casualty figures from the Gaza Health Ministry, as if it were Moses delivering the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai. Apparently, eight months into this war, it still has to be repeated that the Gaza “Health Ministry” is no more than a propaganda arm of the Hamas terror group.

A group that murders, massacres, rapes, beheads, and abducts people, and has a relentless history of fabricating stories, inflating casualties, and using their own civilians as human shields, is not exactly the world’s most trustworthy source.

This has not stopped the international community from using the Hamas figures as evidence to maliciously accuse Israel of genocide, call for embargoes, or seek arrest warrants for Israeli leaders.

Even if you accept Hamas’s figure of 30,000 reported deaths in Gaza during Israel’s war, the ratio of Palestinian non-combatants to terrorists killed has been estimated to be one to one, a level unprecedented in modern warfare. Meanwhile, the actual number of civilian casualties was recently significantly altered when the U.N. acknowledged that over 10,000 of the reported casualties were missing, not verified deaths; they also halved their demographic estimates of men versus women and children. With these updates, the already questionable figures become much lower. It would be lower still if those who have been reported as “civilians” were in fact combatants or, as we saw this week, holding hostages captive.

For Hamas, civilian death is their strategy; Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar has called civilian deaths a “necessary sacrifices.”

As long as the press and world leaders fail to ask these questions, continuing to push false narratives and unsubstantiated casualty figures, they are only enabling and empowering Hamas and perpetuating the violence and suffering they claim to seek to end.

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