

Israel's Failed Bombing Campaign in Gaza

Collective Punishment Won't Defeat Hamas



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Since October 7, Israel has invaded northern Gaza with some 40,000 combat troops and pummeled the small area with one of the most intense bombing campaigns in history. Nearly two million people have fled their homes as a result. More than 17,000 civilians (including some 6,000 children and 5,000 women) have been killed in the attacks, according to Gaza's Hamas-run Ministry of Health, and the U.S. State Department has suggested

that the true toll may be even higher. Israel has bombed hospitals and ambulances and wrecked about half of northern Gaza's buildings. It has cut off virtually all water, food deliveries, and electricity generation for Gaza's 2.2 million inhabitants. By any definition, this campaign counts as a massive act of collective punishment against civilians. Even now, as Israeli forces push deeper into southern Gaza, the exact purpose of Israel's approach is far from clear. Although Israeli leaders claim to be targeting Hamas alone, the evident lack of discrimination

raises real questions about what it is actually up to. Is Israel's eagerness to shatter Gaza a product of the same incompetence that led to the massive failure of the Israeli military to counter Hamas's attack on October 7, the plans for which ended up in the hands of Israeli military and intelligence officials more than a year earlier? Is wrecking northern Gaza and now southern Gaza a prelude to sending the territory's entire population to Egypt, as proposed in a "concept paper" produced by the Israeli Intelligence Ministry?

Whatever the ultimate goal, Israel's collective devastation of Gaza raises deep moral problems. But even judged purely in strategic terms, Israel's approach is doomed to failure—and indeed, it is already failing. Mass civilian punishment has not convinced Gaza's residents to

stop supporting Hamas. To the contrary, it has only heightened resentment among Palestinians. Nor has the campaign succeeded in dismantling the group ostensibly being targeted. Sixty-plus days of war show that while Israel can demolish Gaza, it cannot destroy Hamas. In

fact, the group may be stronger now than it was before. Israel is hardly the first entity to err by placing excessive faith in the coercive magic of airpower. History shows that the large-scale bombing of civilian areas almost never achieves its objectives.

Losing Hearts And Minds

Since the dawn of airpower, countries have sought to bomb enemies into submission and shatter civilian morale. Pushed to their breaking point, the theory goes, populations will rise up against their own governments and switch sides. This strategy of coercive punishment reached its apogee in World War II. History remembers the indiscriminate bombing of cities in that war simply by the place names of the targets: Hamburg (40,000 dead), Darmstadt (12,000), and Dresden (25,000).

Now Gaza can be added to this infamous list. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has himself likened the current campaign to the Allies' fight in World War II. While denying that Israel was engaging in collective punishment today, he pointed out that a Royal Air Force strike targeting Gestapo headquarters in Copenhagen killed scores of schoolchildren.

What Netanyahu left unmentioned was that none of the Allies' efforts to punish civilians en masse actually succeeded. In Germany, the Allied bombing campaign, which took off beginning in 1942, wreaked havoc on civilians, destroying one urban area after another and ultimately a total of 58 German cities and towns by the end of the war. But it never sapped civilian morale or prompted an uprising against

Adolf Hitler, despite the confident predictions of Allied officials. Indeed, the campaign only encouraged Germans to fight harder for fear of a draconian postwar peace.

That failure should not have been so surprising, given what happened when the Nazis tried the same tactic. The Blitz, their bombing of London and other British cities in 1940–41, killed more than 40,000 people, and yet British Prime Minister Winston Churchill refused to capitulate. Instead, he invoked the resulting civilian casualties to rally society to make the sacrifices necessary for victory. Rather than shattering morale, the Blitz motivated the British to organize a years-long effort—with their U.S. and Soviet allies—to counterattack and ultimately conquer the country that had bombed them.

In fact, never in history has a bombing campaign caused the targeted population to revolt against its own government. The United States has tried the tactic numerous times, to no avail. During the Korean War, it destroyed 90 percent of electricity generation in North Korea. In the Vietnam War, it knocked out nearly as much power in North Vietnam. And in the Persian Gulf War, U.S. air attacks disrupted 90 percent of electricity generation in Iraq. But in none of these cases did the population rise up.

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Despite nearly two months of heavy military operations—virtually unrestrained by the United States and the rest of the world—Israel has achieved only marginal results. By any meaningful metric, the campaign has not led to Hamas's even partial defeat.

