

Every accusation a confession: Israel and double lie of 'human shields'



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OPINION

Among the most frequently deployed weapons in Israel's hasbara arsenal is the so-called "human shields" ruse.

For decades now, Israel has systematically used this propaganda device as a trick to justify war crimes, to shift the blame for its crimes to others, to overcome the principle of distinction in humanitarian law, to dehumanize Palestinian victims, and to arm its Western proxies and complicit media companies with ammunition to protect Israeli impunity.

But a chain of international investigations reveals two clear conclusions about these charges: First, Palestinian combatants generally do not use human shields. And, secondly, Israel does.



Palestinians look at the destruction after an Israeli airstrike on a crowded tent camp housing Palestinians displaced by the war in Muwasi, Gaza Strip, on Sept. 10, 2024.

ABDEL KAREEM HANA/AP

International law

"Human shields" is common parlance for a particular violation of international humanitarian and human rights law. It is strictly prohibited in all circumstances.

As summarized by the authoritative commentary of the ICRC, it refers to the "intentional co-location of military objectives and civilians or persons hors de combat with the specific intent of trying to prevent the targeting of those military objectives." ("Persons hors de combat" include fighters who have laid down their arms, prisoners, the sick and wounded, etc.).

The classic case is when a group of soldiers force civilians from the other side to march ahead of them into a battle zone or into an unsecured structure, in hopes that the enemy will not shoot at the soldiers for fear of hitting the civilians.

But Israel, in its automatic claim of "human shields" each time it kills large numbers of civilians and destroys protected civilian infrastructure, pays no mind to this definition. Instead, it simply extends the phrase to all civilian deaths. On cue and without evidence, complicit Western politicians, their official spokespersons, and media corporations then dutifully repeat Israel's human shield mantra over and over again.

For Israel, refugees going about their daily lives in refugee camps, patients and doctors in hospitals, people praying in churches and mosques, and humanitarian workers delivering food to the hungry are all human shields.

Never mind that they have neither been compelled by Hamas, nor have they volunteered to shield anyone or anything. And never mind that there is often no legitimate (or proportionate) military objective in situations where Israel makes the human shields claim.

If these civilians are killed by Israeli bombs or bullets, according to the Israeli narrative, it is their own fault or that of Hamas, because they both live in the same densely populated places.

But the mere presence of armed forces or members of the enemy in populated civilian areas does not constitute the use of human shields. Indeed, Israel should carefully consider the implications of its repeated claims that it does, given that it maintains its military headquarters in a busy section of the city of Tel Aviv.

Nor does the presence of fighters in a protected civilian location remove the protected status of that location. Israeli soldiers can be seen in every Israeli hospital. Does that render those hospitals a legitimate military target? Of course not. To deny the same protection to Palestinians would be both a grave breach humanitarian law and (Western journalists take note) a blatant act of racism.

Needless to say, that is not how the concept of human shields works in international law.

In pretending that it does, Israel and its Western proxies willfully ignore three inconvenient elements: Logic, facts, and law.

Israel's practice of targeting civilians

First, acceptance of these claims requires Israel's pliable proxies in the West to ignore decades of experience and volumes of collected evidence that Israel often makes no distinction between civilians and combatants in its military activities and, in many other cases, directly targets civilians and civilian infrastructure.

Israel routinely attacks hospitals, schools, shelters, and refugee camps. Its snipers and drones hunt down and execute civilians. And its A.I.-guided weapons, labeled with cruel names like "Where's Daddy," are designed to wait until targets

are home with their families before bombing them. It even guns down civilians, including children and women, waving white flags. These criminal patterns are well known and well documented in the work of successive investigations by the UN and by international, Israeli, and Palestinian human rights organizations. But the very logic of human shields rests on the idea of deterrence; that is, that soldiers will hesitate to shoot if civilians are at risk. No such logic exists with a military force like Israel's that does not distinguish between civilians and combatants and that routinely practices the direct targeting of civilians.

Indeed, Israel's Dahiya Doc-

trine, on the basis of which it has long carried out the intentional massive destruction of civilian areas as a means of terrorizing civilian populations, is proof that Israel cannot be deterred by the use of Palestinian or Lebanese human shields. The current wave of genocide perpetrated by Israel in Gaza has left no doubt about its willingness to kill Palestinian civilians intentionally and without hesitation. And its Hannibal Directive, under which Israel kills its own citizens (soldiers and civilians alike) to prevent them from hindering its military aims means that it may not even be deterred by human shielding with its own citizens.

Multiple human rights reports show that Palestinian combatants do not use human shields, but Israel does. Israel's false claims about Palestinian human shields are just attempts to justify its own targeting of civilians.



Palestinians inspect the damage to a school sheltering displaced people after it was hit by an Israeli strike, amid the Israeli war on Gaza, at Beach refugee camp in Gaza City, on September 22, 2024.

DAWOU ABU ALKAS/REUTERS