The American Jewish Committee protects the rights and freedoms of Jews the world over; combats bigotry and anti-Semitism and promotes human rights for all; works for the security of Israel and deepened understanding between Americans and Israelis; advocates public policy positions rooted in American democratic values and the perspectives of the Jewish heritage; and enhances the creative vitality of the Jewish people. Founded in 1906, it is the pioneer human-relations agency in the United States.
Yossi Klein Halevi is the Israel correspondent for the New Republic and an associate fellow at the Shalem Center. He is author of At the Entrance to the Garden of Eden: A Jew’s Search for God with Christians and Muslims in the Holy Land (Morrow, 2001). He is currently writing a book about the Israeli paratroopers who reunited Jerusalem in 1967.
During the last four years, Israel has been the target of an experiment, testing the breaking point of a modern society under terror assault. The terrorists’ goal has been to turn Israelis into a nation of shut-ins, fearing the most minimal gathering of fellow citizens as an inviting target, a mortal threat. In trying to deny Israelis their public space, the terrorists have aimed at unraveling our collective existence.

No society has ever been subjected to this sustained intensity of terror. Yet at the same time, no society has been subjected to the depth of scrutiny and criticism that Israel and its defensive war against terror have endured. For Israelis, the relentless criticism of our conduct of this war is experienced as a kind of psychological terrorism, a second front in the war against our being. Accusations of excessive use of force are greeted by Israelis with dismay or bitter cynicism, as if Israel and the international community inhabit opposing moral universes. If anything, many Israelis, including political moderates, believe that Israel has repeatedly erred on the side of restraint.

To understand just how ludicrous the accusations against Israel appear from here, consider the following story: Last winter, the Israeli army received an intelligence report that the senior leaders of Hamas, including key terrorist operatives, were meeting in a house in Gaza City. With a single bomb dropped from the air, the terror organization responsible for murdering hundreds of Israelis and wounding and crippling thousands more...
would be incapacitated, at least in the short term.

But the decision-makers faced a dilemma. A one-ton bomb would destroy the entire house, leaving little chance of survivors, but would also destroy adjacent homes and result in innocent casualties. A half-ton bomb, by contrast, would create no fallout to neighboring structures but would destroy only the target’s upper floor. Should Israel sacrifice innocent Palestinians to prevent the future murder of innocent Israelis, or should it protect Palestinian lives and thereby risk its own citizens’ lives by gambling on the effectiveness of a smaller bomb?

Relying on intelligence that assumed that the Hamas leaders were meeting on an upper floor, the air force opted for the half-ton bomb. But the intelligence turned out to be wrong: They were meeting in the basement. The Hamas leadership escaped virtually unharmed.

Agonizing Dilemmas Define this War

That kind of agonizing dilemma defines this terror war—the cruelest war ever inflicted on Israel. We face an enemy that operates from the opposite considerations of the policymakers who opted for the half-ton bomb: Inflicting as many civilian casualties as possible is precisely the point of the terror war. To achieve that immoral end, every immoral means is allowed. Terrorists have smuggled explosives belts in ambulances, used children and animals as bomb carriers, transformed hospitals and mosques into hiding places and operational centers. In recent weeks, a bomb
was discovered hidden inside a baby carriage, two Tānzim terrorists were arrested in a maternity ward, where they kept an arsenal, and a Fatah terrorist pretending to be a cancer patient tried to obtain entry into an Israeli hospital and blow himself up. Palestinian civilians are used by terrorists as shields: Recently, a teenage boy in the Gaza town of Beit Hanoun was murdered by terrorists after he’d tried to stop them from using his family’s home as a base from which to launch mortar attacks on Israeli towns.

In this terror war, whose essence is erasing any distinction on both sides between combatants and civilians, Israeli soldiers are confronted with untenable moral decisions. Consider the dilemma of a twenty-year-old soldier at a West Bank roadblock: Does he wave through an ambulance transporting a patient who appears critically ill, or does he insist on a thorough check of the vehicle? Does he risk the life of an innocent Palestinian or the lives of innocent Israelis who are depending on him as the last barrier against terrorist infiltration?

Inevitably, when Israel lowers the pressure against the terror infrastructure, the result is increased terror. Last summer, Israel ceded control of Bethlehem to the Palestinian Authority, as a first step toward withdrawing from other West Bank towns; almost immediately, a suicide bomber crossed into Jerusalem from Bethlehem and blew himself up on a bus. Just recently, the army removed dozens of roadblocks around the Jenin area; two terrorists from Jenin, intending to blow themselves up in Jerusalem, proceeded to travel freely to the outskirts of the capital, where
they encountered their first roadblock. Unable to cross, they detonated their bombs there, killing two Palestinians and wounding three soldiers.

Given the extent of the terrorist provocation and the disproportionate firepower at Israel’s disposal, the army has handled this war with remarkable restraint. For all the accusations against Israel for supposedly applying excessive force, the casualty figures tell a very different story. Palestinian casualties have been 2,800 dead, compared to one thousand Israeli dead. (Over half of Palestinian casualties have been combatants; while three-quarters of Israeli casualties have been civilians.) Israel has suffered more casualties from terrorism in the last four years than in the previous fifty years of statehood combined—casualties which could have been drastically reduced had we resorted to the indiscriminate measures our enemies routinely accuse us of employing. In fact, Israel is fighting a precision war: Not one artillery shell has been fired, and every target has been pinpointed. There have been no mass expulsions, no destroyed villages, no indiscriminate air bombardments, no food or fuel blockades—in short, none of the tactics that countries, including democracies, fighting under far less provocative conditions have routinely adopted in wartime.

A case in point is Israel’s anti-terror operation in Jenin, in April 2002. That operation, launched after Palestinian suicide bombers murdered 120 Israelis in one month, involved house-to-house fighting in narrow streets and alleys. Palestinian spokesmen initially spoke of a massacre involving of hundreds of civil-
ians. (One of the outrages of this war is the Palestinian campaign of disinformation that is accepted at face value by much of the international community.) The final tally was fifty-two Palestinian deaths, half of whom were combatants. Despite exhaustive probing by the media and the United Nations, no evidence was discovered that any civilians were deliberately killed. At the same time, Israel lost twenty-three soldiers—a result of the army’s decision to avoid indiscriminate firepower against houses from which terrorists were shooting, to minimize civilian casualties. In lying about a massacre, the Palestinians tried to turn Jenin into a symbol for how Israel has conducted this war. Inadvertently, they were right: Jenin is an apt embodiment of Israel’s honorable response to an assault on its being.

**The Longing to Destroy Israel**

In Palestinian discourse in the media, schools, and mosques, the longing to destroy Israel is commonplace. A generation of Palestinian children has been raised by Yasir Arafat’s regime to see Jews as humanity’s great evil, descendants of “pigs and monkeys,” in one popular formulation, and suicide bombers as religious saints and educational role models. Yet among Israelis, there has been no similar resort to genocidal politics. The attempt by fringe far-right parties like Moledet to promote “transfer” of Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza is dismissed by the mainstream as fantasy; instead, the heated argument in Israeli society today is over “transferring” Jews from Gaza settlements. Indeed, the Israeli public has gone even further left in
recent years; polls consistently show that, for real peace, a majority would make conces-
sions unthinkable a decade ago.

In this war, rage is hardly confined to the Palestinian side. Tens of thousands of Israelis, after all, have directly experienced terrorism. Yet even though a people’s army—a random cross section of Israeli society—is engaged in intimate conflict with terrorists embedded in a civilian population, most Israeli soldiers have behaved honorably, refraining from indiscriminate attacks on Palestinians.

That is not to minimize the seriousness of the cases of abuse that have occurred. The Israeli army is currently investigating some 600 cases of alleged abuse and humiliation at roadblocks and elsewhere (including one alleged deliberate murder of an innocent Palestinian). No doubt there are many more incidents of abuse that haven’t yet been exposed. Those who deny the legitimacy of Israel’s struggle will regard the abuses as emblematic of an inherently abusive and unjustified war. For most Israelis, though, they are an illegitimate by-product of a legitimate war.

The army has begun psychologically preparing soldiers for roadblock duty; and is considering mounting cameras at roadblocks to monitor soldiers’ behavior.

Yet, for Israel’s critics, the roadblocks themselves are indefensible—along with targeted killings, temporary reoccupation of Palestinian towns and villages, and, of course, the West Bank security barrier. In fact, Israel’s critics have denounced every tactic—preemptive or defensive—that the country has devised over the last four years of terror
assault. Though the critics’ arguments are couched in a highly selective use of international law and morality, their real premise is that Israel has no right to defend itself because its goal isn’t self-defense at all but conquest. The Palestinians, critics concede, may be resorting to unjust means, but they are resisting occupation, while Israel is supposedly fighting to maintain the occupation. And so, critics conclude, there can be no just means for unjust ends.

The starting point for assessing the morality of Israel’s response to this war, then, is determining whether Israel is fighting a legitimate war of defense or an illegitimate war of conquest.

Fighting to Create Conditions to Safely End the Occupation

From the perspective of Israel’s critics, the second intifada is essentially an extension of the first intifada of the late 1980s. Yet most Israelis perceive this war in the opposite way, in effect as an anti-intifada. Unlike the first intifada, which was an uprising of mostly unarmed Palestinian civilians against armed Israeli soldiers, this war is an assault by armed Palestinians against unarmed Israeli civilians.

More crucially, the Israeli government, and the majority of the Israeli people, accept an independent Palestine as inevitable. Rather than fighting to maintain the occupation indefinitely, Israel is fighting to create safe conditions that will allow it to end the occupation.

This is a fundamental shift from the circumstances of the first intifada. At that time, Israel was still committed to preventing the
emergence of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza, which Israeli governments of both left and right traditionally perceived as a mortal threat to Israel’s long-term viability. Yet the encounter, in the late 1980s, of a generation of Israeli reservists with a hostile Palestinian population resisting occupation led to an agonizing reappraisal of Israeli policy. In army tents throughout the territories, debates over the future of the territories became a routine part of reserve duty. Many of us who served then believed that the onus was on Israel to initiate an overture to the Palestinians and offer them a viable political alternative to endless occupation.

If Israelis aren’t as anguished now about Palestinian suffering as we were during the first intifada, that is because of outrage not only against the war’s terrorist tactics but against the Palestinians’ very declaration of war, after Israel essentially conceded most of their demands. Overcoming existential fears and suspicions of being deceived, Israel agreed to what had once been its ultimate nightmare—a PLO state, headed by Yasir Arafat, in almost all the territories, including East Jerusalem. Israel became the first country in history to voluntarily offer shared sovereignty over its capital city and withdrawal from its historical heartland.

Rather than the occupation leading desperate Palestinians to terrorism, it is terrorism that has led a desperate Israel into resuming the occupation.

Not surprisingly, Israelis, among the most argumentative people anywhere, now display little appetite for dissent from government policy. Indeed, not since the 1973 Yom Kip-
pur War have Israelis been so united on security issues as they are now. For the Israeli mainstream, this war has confirmed suspicions that, from the very inception of the Oslo negotiations, the Palestinian leadership was never committed to reconciliation, but saw the peace process as a “Trojan horse,” in the words of the late PLO leader Faisal Husseini—a means to augment power and then subvert Israel from within.

Why the Fence Is a Restrained Response to Terror

Israel’s most controversial anti-terror response—the security barrier being built along the length of the West Bank—is a belated attempt to curtail that “Trojan horse.” Yet, astonishingly, the fence—Israel’s most restrained response to the terrorist onslaught—has become an international symbol of aggression.

In fact, Israel has tried to minimize the suffering caused by the fence, building dozens of gates for farmers along the route and replanting every olive tree uprooted during construction. In its recent ruling curtailing the route of the fence on humanitarian grounds, the Israeli Supreme Court upheld the army’s assertion that its decisions regarding the fence have been motivated entirely by security considerations, rather than any hidden political agenda or “land grab.”

Israel is not morally or legally obliged to honor the Green Line, which is, after all, only an armistice line through disputed territory. Waiving Israel’s claim to any territory over the Green Line might, perhaps, make sense in a benign Middle East that is prepared to accept
a non-Arab, non-Muslim state in its midst, but not in today’s Middle East, which celebrates mini-genocidal acts of terrorism as sacraments and denies the most basic legitimacy to the Jewish story. Finally, adhering to the Green Line would go beyond what the Clinton proposals after Camp David envisioned as the borders of a Palestinian state, thereby rewarding four years of terror.

The goal of Israeli policy, and the instincts of average Israelis, are precisely the opposite: to ensure that the terrorists emerge from this war convinced that they have lost. And so Israelis have refused to cede their public space, instead clinging to the pretense of normal life. Cafes and restaurants, even those that suffered terror attacks, are no less full these days than they were before the terror war began. Children maintain the astonishing freedom of movement that Israeli youth have always enjoyed. During holidays, national parks are so crowded that authorities request the public to avoid them.

**One of the Great Victories of Jewish History**

Israelis’ refusal to surrender to the forces of terrorist dissipation may come to be seen as one of the great victories of Jewish history. Even if most of the international community doesn’t quite recognize it, Israel has been humanity’s laboratory for testing the durability of democratic values under permanent siege. In its resolve and restraint, its political sobriety and emotional steadiness, Israel has been a blessing to a terrorized world.

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