

A Perfect Definition of 'Terrorism'

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This war on the people of Gaza isn't really about rockets. Nor is it about "restoring Israel's deterrence," as the Israeli press might have you believe. Far more revealing are the words of Moshe Yaalon, then the Israeli Defense Forces chief of staff, in 2002: "The Palestinians must be made to understand in the deepest recesses of their consciousness that they are a defeated people."



Tom Friedman

Tom Friedman, one of the nation's leading propagandists for the Iraq War and a vigorous supporter of all of Israel's wars, has a [column today in *The New York Times*](#) explaining and praising the Israeli attack on Gaza. For the sake of robust and diverse debate (for which our Liberal Media is so well known), Friedman's column today appears alongside [an Op-Ed from *The Atlantic's* Jeffrey Goldberg](#), one of the nation's leading ([and most deceitful](#)) propagandists for the Iraq War and a vigorous supporter of all of Israel's wars, who explains that Hamas is incorrigibly hateful and radical and cannot be negotiated with. One can hardly imagine a more compelling exhibit demonstrating the complete lack of accountability in the "journalism" profession -- at least for those who are [loyal establishment spokespeople who reflexively cheer on wars](#) -- than a leading Op-Ed page presenting **these two** war advocates, of all people, as **experts**, of all things, on the joys and glories of the latest Middle East war.

In any event, Friedman's column today is uncharacteristically and refreshingly honest. He explains that the 2006 Israeli invasion and bombing of Lebanon was, contrary to conventional wisdom, a great success. To make this case, Friedman acknowledges that the deaths of innocent Lebanese civilians was not an unfortunate and undesirable by-product of that war, but rather, was **a vital aspect of the Israeli strategy** -- the centerpiece, actually, of teaching Lebanese civilians a lesson they would not soon forget:

Israel's counterstrategy was to use its Air Force to pummel Hezbollah **and**, while not directly targeting the Lebanese civilians with whom Hezbollah was intertwined, **to inflict substantial property damage and collateral casualties on Lebanon at large**. It was not pretty, but it was logical. Israel basically said that when dealing with a

nonstate actor, Hezbollah, nested among civilians, **the only long-term source of deterrence was to exact enough pain on the civilians** - the families and employers of the militants - to restrain Hezbollah in the future.

Israel's military was not focused on the morning after the war in Lebanon - when Hezbollah declared victory and the Israeli press declared defeat. It was focused on the morning after the morning after, when all the real business happens in the Middle East. **That's when Lebanese civilians, in anguish, said to Hezbollah: "What were you thinking? Look what destruction you have visited on your own community! For what? For whom?"**

Friedman says that he is "unsure" whether the current Israeli attack on Gaza is similarly designed to teach Palestinians the same lesson by inflicting "heavy pain" on civilians, but he hopes it is:

In Gaza, I still can't tell if Israel is trying to eradicate Hamas or trying to "educate" Hamas, **by inflicting** a heavy death toll on Hamas militants **and heavy pain on the Gaza population**. If it is out to destroy Hamas, casualties will be horrific and the aftermath could be Somalia-like chaos. If it is out to educate Hamas, Israel may have achieved its aims.

The war strategy which Friedman is heralding -- what he explicitly describes with euphemism-free candor as "exacting enough pain on civilians" in order to teach them a lesson -- is about [as definitive of a war crime as it gets](#). It also happens to be the classic, textbook definition of "terrorism." Here is [how the U.S. Department of State defined "terrorism"](#) in its 2001 publication, *Patterns of Global Terrorism*:

No one definition of terrorism has gained universal acceptance. For the purposes of this report, however, we have chosen the definition of terrorism contained in Title 22 of the United States Code, Section 2656f(d). That statute contains the following definitions:

The term "terrorism" means **premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant (1) targets** by subnational groups or clandestine agents, usually **intended to influence an audience**. . . .

(1) For purposes of this definition, the term "noncombatant" is interpreted to include, in addition to civilians, military personnel who at the time of the incident are unarmed and/or not on duty.

Other than the fact that Friedman is advocating these actions for an actual state rather than a "subnational group," can anyone identify any differences between (a) what Friedman approvingly claims was done to the Lebanese and what he advocates be done to Palestinians and (b) what the State Department formally defines as "terrorism"? I doubt anyone can. Isn't Friedman's "logic" **exactly** the [rationale used by Al Qaeda](#): we're going to inflict "civilian pain" on Americans so that they stop supporting their government's domination of our land and so their government thinks twice about bombing more Muslim countries? It's also exactly the same "logic" that fuels the rockets from Hezbollah and Hamas into Israel.

It should be emphasized that the mere fact that Tom Friedman claims that this is Israel's motivation

isn't proof that it is. The sociopathic lust of a single war cheerleader can't fairly be projected onto those who are actually prosecuting the war. But one can't help noticing that this "teach-them-a-lesson" justification for civilian deaths in Gaza appears with some frequency among its advocates, at least among a certain strain of super-warrior, Israel-centric Americans -- e.g.: Marty "[do not fuck with the Jews](#)" Peretz and Michael "[to wipe out a man's entire family, it's hard to imagine that doesn't give his colleagues at least a moment's pause](#)" Goldfarb -- who love to cheer on Middle East wars from a safe and sheltered distance.

Some opponents of the Israeli war actually agree with Friedman about the likely goals of the attack on Gaza. [Writing last week in *The New York Times*](#), Columbia Professor Rashid Khalidi noted:

This war on the people of Gaza isn't really about rockets. Nor is it about "restoring Israel's deterrence," as the Israeli press might have you believe. Far more revealing are **the words of Moshe Yaalon, then the Israeli Defense Forces chief of staff, in 2002: "The Palestinians must be made to understand in the deepest recesses of their consciousness that they are a defeated people."**

[This AP article](#) yesterday described how "terrified residents ran for cover Tuesday in a densely populated neighborhood of Gaza City as Israeli troops backed by tanks thrust deeper into the city." It reported that "an Israeli warplane fired a missile at the former Gaza city hall, used as a court building in recent years The 1910 structure was destroyed and many stores in the market around it were badly damaged." And it quoted an Israeli military officer as follows: "**Soldiers shoot at anything suspicious**, use lots of firepower, and blast holes through walls to move around."

The efficacy of Friedman's desired strategy of inflicting pain on Palestinian civilians in order to change their thinking and behavior is unclear. The lack of clarity is due principally to the fact that Israel is still blocking journalists from entering Gaza. But [this Sunday's *New York Times* article](#) -- reporting on unconfirmed claims that Israel was using white phosphorus on the civilian population (a claim the IDF expressly refused to deny) -- contains this anecdotal evidence that The Friedman Strategy is actually quite counter-productive:

Still, white phosphorus can cause injury, and a growing number of Gazans report being hurt by it, including in Beit Lahiya, Khan Yunis, and in eastern and southwestern Gaza City. When exposed to air, it ignites, experts say, and if packed into an artillery shell, it can rain down flaming chemicals that cling to anything they touch.

Luay Suboh, 10, from Beit Lahiya, lost his eyesight and some skin on his face Saturday when, his mother said, a fiery substance clung to him as he darted home from a shelter where his family was staying to pick up clothes.

The substance smelled like burned trash, said Ms. Jaawanah, the mother who fled her home in Zeitoun, who had experienced it too. **She had no affection for Hamas, but her sufferings were changing that. "Do you think I'm against them firing rockets now?" she asked, referring to Hamas. "No. I was against it before. Not anymore."**

It's far easier to imagine a population subjected to this treatment becoming increasingly radicalized and belligerent rather than submissive and compliant, as Friedman intends. But while the efficacy of The Friedman Strategy is unclear, the fact that it is a perfect distillation of a "war crime" and "terrorism" is not unclear at all.

One might ordinarily find it surprising that our elite opinion-makers are so openly and explicitly advocating war crimes and terrorism ("inflict substantial property damage and collateral casualties on Lebanon at large" and "'educate' Hamas by inflicting heavy pain on the Gaza population"). But when one considers that most of this, in the U.S., is coming from the very people who applied the same "[suck-on-this](#)" reasoning to justify the destruction of Iraq, and even more so, when one considers that our highest political officials are [now so openly](#) -- [even proudly](#) -- [acknowledging their own war crimes](#), while our political and media elites [desperately \(and almost unanimously\) engage in every possible maneuver to protect them from any consequences from that](#), Friedman's explicit advocacy of these sorts of things is a perfectly natural thing to see.

UPDATE: [In comments, casual_observer -- with ample citations -- objects](#) to my characterization of white phosphorus reports in Gaza as "unconfirmed," and argues that while the substance does have permissible and legitimate uses under the laws of war, this particular usage in urban areas can be used to sow terror in the civilian population -- i.e., is an ideal instrument for advancing The Friedman Strategy.

Quite relatedly, [Iraq War veteran Brandon Friedman chronicles the truly disturbed warrior fantasies](#) that are becoming increasingly common (and increasingly disturbed) on the war-cheerleading Right. The relationship between that pathology and people like Friedman is too obvious to require any elaboration.

UPDATE II: In response to multiple comments protesting that Israel does not seek to kill civilians, permit me to make clear, again, that the criticism here is directed towards Tom Friedman's claims about what Israel's motives are and should be in bombing and invading Lebanon and Gaza. I'm not assuming that those are actually Israel's motives and stressed that point as clearly as the English language permits:

It should be emphasized that the mere fact that Tom Friedman claims that this is Israel's motivation isn't proof that it is. The sociopathic lust of a single war cheerleader can't fairly be projected onto those who are actually prosecuting the war.

The other point worth noting is that for an American citizen to criticize Israel's wars without criticizing every similar or worse act of aggression is not to "hold Israel to a higher or different standard." The U.S. Government funds Israel's actions, specifically provides the arms for their [various bombing campaigns](#) and [invasions](#), and continuously uses its U.N. veto power to protect what Israel does. American citizens therefore bear a responsibility for Israel's actions that is not the case for actions which the U.S. Government does not fund and otherwise enable.

This objection ("why are you complaining about Israel but not the rebels in Sri Lanka?") rests on the same fallacy as the accusation that American citizens are being "anti-American" when they criticize the actions of their own government more than the actions of other governments ("Why are you complaining that Bush waterboards when North Korea starves its citizens to death and Iran stones gay people?"). Citizens bear a particular responsibility to object to unjust actions which their own Government engages in or enables. It shouldn't be the case -- but it is -- that Americans fund, arm and enable Israel's wars. Those are American weapons which, at least in part, are being used to destroy Gaza, and Americans therefore bear a special responsibility for condemning Israel's unjust actions to a far greater extent than the actions of any other country except for the U.S.

One final note: the fact that all sorts of prior wars, including ones waged by Western powers, contain

events that could comfortably fit the definition of "terrorism" isn't a refutation of the point I'm making. If anything, it bolsters the point. "Terrorism" is probably the single most elastic and easily manipulated term in our political lexicon. Who the perpetrators and victims are of "terrorism" is almost always a function of who is wielding the term rather than some objective assessment. Aimlessly shooting rockets towards civilians (as Hamas and Hezbollah do) and dropping bombs from 35,000 feet that you know will slaughter many civilians while viewing that slaughter **as a strategic benefit** (as Friedman advocates) are acts that have far more in common with each other than differences.

UPDATE III: [John Cole points to a really extreme -- and quite amazing -- example](#) of what happens when only one side of a political debate is organized, engaged and aggressive.

Conversely, in comments, [El Cid points to an important historical example](#) illustrating the real benefits that come from a President's supporters applying intense and **adversarial** pressure to ensure that their political priorities are heeded.

UPDATE IV:

Daniel Larison, as usual, is

[well worth reading today on this topic](#)

Meanwhile, Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting -- in an [item entitled "Terrorism on the New York Times Op-Ed Page"](#) -- examines Friedman's history of making similar statements, and raises this question: is it even possible to imagine an Op-Ed or column being published by a major newspaper that enthusiastically trumpeted all of the great strategic benefits that would accrue to Muslims from the violent deaths of large numbers of Israeli civilians, the way Friedman today did with regard to the deaths of Palestinian and Lebanese civilians?

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