



## DIOCESE OF WHEELING-CHARLESTON

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### **Catholic Just War Theory applied to Israeli-Hamas Conflict**

The Catholic Church has a long history of reflecting on the justification, conditions and conduct of war. Let's look at the conflict between Hamas and Israel in the light of traditional Catholic just war theory (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, # 2309).

When a country is attacked, a *defensive war* is justified. War should only be undertaken because of lasting and grave harm. It should be the last resort, other means of ending conflict being impractical or ineffective. There must be serious prospects of success and the use of arms should not produce harm and disorder worse than the evil to be eliminated.

Considering Hamas, it is conducting an *aggressive war*, despite its claims to the contrary. The attacks launched earlier this month were not the last resort to address legitimate Palestinian grievances. While the Middle East is a cauldron of resentments and hatreds, gains such as the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty and the Oslo Agreements show that, with good will and international support, progress can be made.

The main obstacle to peace is Hamas' hatred of Jews and its desire to destroy Israel. Instead of seeking to negotiate with Israeli authorities, Hamas has launched attacks that have caused irreparable harm by killing many hundreds of Israelis with no real possibility of succeeding in destroying Israel. Hamas' practice of hiding its fighters among non-combatants, including women and children, is cowardly and reprehensible. By attacking Israel and stirring it to a vigorous counterattack, Hamas has brought on worse evils that it seeks to eliminate.

On the Israeli side, it has a right to defend its people and to neutralize Hamas' ability to strike again. The harm caused to its people is grave; families cannot replace those murdered by the terrorists. One can argue that recent Israeli governments should have been more open to dealing constructively with the Palestinian people in Gaza and the West Bank, but Hamas has shown that it is an unwilling partner for dialogue.

Israel will successfully defend its own territory from Hamas and will rebuild its defenses against future attacks. It is less clear that it can completely eliminate Hamas from Gaza. The danger for Israel is that a blockade on food, water, medicine and electricity and a full-scale ground war in Gaza will cause such loss of life that Israel will lose the international sympathy it now enjoys, even from its usual critics, and future prospects for peace will be severely undermined. Israel's strategy should focus on swift action towards its stated goals followed by cooperation with the international community and humanitarian organizations who seek to help innocent Palestinians, particularly those injured and displaced.

Those of us who cherish Israel and want Jews to flourish in their historic homeland can and must pray to the God who is over us all, that peace based on justice may someday and somehow be achieved in the Holy Land.

Sincerely in Christ,

*+ Mark E. Brennan*

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