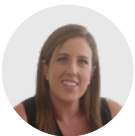


'Unlawful, Unethical, Horrifying': IDF Ethics Code Author on Alleged Use of 'Hannibal Directive' During Hamas Attack

Asa Kasher, the philosopher who wrote the IDF's Code of Conduct, tells Haaretz that incidents in which the infamous operational order may have been used on October 7 must be investigated immediately: 'There is absolutely nothing [in the code] to allow someone to kill an Israeli citizen, in uniform or not'



Prof. Emeritus Asa Kasher. Credit: Kobi Gideon/BauBau



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It is known as the Hannibal Directive, although no one is quite sure of the reason behind the name. It's a controversial and often misunderstood and misapplied operational order developed by the Israel Defense Forces in 1986 in response to an attempt by Hezbollah to abduct two soldiers into southern Lebanon.

In its original version, it outlined the procedures to be followed when a soldier may be at risk of abduction into enemy territory. The directive, drafted by Yossi Peled, the head of the IDF's Northern Command at the time, along with Colonel Gabi Ashkenazi and Colonel Yaacov Amidror, emphasized the priority of rescuing captured soldiers from their captors, even if it meant risking harm to the captive soldiers themselves. Notably, the order was formulated without consulting legal experts.

The full text of the directive was never published, but a portion of it states, "During an abduction, the major mission is to rescue our soldiers from the abductors even at the price of harming or wounding our soldiers. Light-arms fire is to be used in order to bring the abductors to the ground or to stop them. If the vehicle or the abductors do not stop, single-shot (sniper) fire should be aimed at them, deliberately, in order to hit the abductors, even if this means hitting our soldiers. In any event, everything will be done to stop the vehicle and not allow it to escape."

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For years, the content of the Hannibal Directive and its use by the IDF was cloaked in secrecy. It is rumored to have been invoked a mere handful of times between 1986 and 2016, when it was officially revoked by the military.

On Haaretz's Hebrew Podcast, 'The Week,' Prof. Emeritus Asa Kasher, from the Department of Philosophy at Tel Aviv University, a

senior researcher at the Institute for National Security Studies, and architect of the [IDF's code of ethics](#), discussed the Hannibal Directive, its legality, and whether or not it was ordered on October 7 during Hamas' onslaught on southern Israel.

According to Kasher, one of the difficulties in assessing the legality and the morality of the Hannibal Directive is its wide range of versions and interpretations. "First of all, naturally there are different versions of the same procedure depending on the unit or troops that have to deal with it and it changes depending on the command or the area," he said.

"There's definitely more than one version of the order...But there's also other changes, even contradictions among the versions," he explained. "In both the original order and the current version, there is absolutely nothing that would allow for someone to kill an Israeli citizen, whether he is in uniform or not."

But accounts of what happened in [one location](#) in Kibbutz Be'eri during the Hamas attack on October 7 indicate that the order was not followed. According to reports, including on Channel 12 news in Israel and a sweeping investigative report published in the [New York Times](#), the question of whether a mistaken understanding of the Hannibal Directive was used centers around an incident that took place in the Cohen family home, where 14 Israelis were held hostage, and is based on the testimony of Yasmin Porat and Hadas Dagan, the only survivors of the incident.



A destroyed home in Kibbutz Be'eri, in October. Credit: Eliyahu Hershkovitz

According to Porat, after she was released by a Hamas terrorist, she was questioned by the Police Special Anti-Terror Unit and told them that there were about 40 terrorists and 14 civilian hostages still in the house. Dagan was among the hostages inside the house, where she says an Israeli tank fired two shells at it. She was the only Israeli to survive, and she has confirmed Porat's account.

The families of those who died in "Pessi's House," as it is now called, are demanding that the IDF open a probe into the event. According to the New York Times report, Brig. Gen Barak Hiram, the commander of Division 99, said he ordered a tank commander to fire on the Cohen home "even at the cost of civilian casualties."

Kasher was hesitant to confirm the details of the event before an investigation has taken place, but he raised a different point. "I have seen all the versions of the Hannibal Directive and I have never seen any mention of [its use in reference to] attempts to kidnap civilians," he said.

"The idea that you would try to prevent an attempt to move [civilians] into Gaza by firing a tank mortar into the structure they are being held in is intolerable. It's unacceptable from the perspective of army orders. And it's unacceptable from the perspective of army values," he said.

Kasher stridently agreed with the families that an investigation is needed immediately, starting with the Military Defense Counsel and if need be moved to the State Attorney. "How is it possible that a high ranking army official would give a command that so immediately and definitely endangers the life of so many civilians? It's just horrifying."

The army has said it will investigate the incident, but only after the war is over. "This is their approach," Kasher said. "We hear it all the time from the army spokesperson: 'We aren't speaking about it now. The day will come. We will investigate and the results will be publicized to the public.'"

But Kasher believes this incident calls for an immediate investigation, similar to the one that was undertaken when three hostages managed to escape Hamas captivity in Gaza only to be accidentally killed by the Israeli army.

Kasher discussed another incident that took place on October 7, on the Israeli border with Gaza. According to an investigation conducted by the Israeli newspaper Yediot Aharonot, troops received orders to prevent hostages from being taken into Gaza by force, if necessary.



Attendees flee the Hamas massacre at the Nova Festival party near Kibbutz Re'im, Saturday, October 7, 2023

Around 12:00 P.M. on October 7, IDF helicopters strafed cars attempting to cross the border; there are unconfirmed indications that captive Israeli civilians were hit. According to Kasher, "On the surface, this sounds totally unacceptable from every aspect. Against orders. Against procedure. Against values. Against ethics. And possibly against the law."

For Kasher, whether or not a misconceived understanding of the Hannibal Directive was invoked on Black Saturday is a question that clearly needs to be answered, but it is secondary to what he sees as the real crux of the issue: "The army has in the past, and continues to, cultivate an ideology wherein sacrificing one's life is revered above all else."

From there, Kasher explains, it is not a far leap for soldiers to accept what they are told is the Hannibal Directive. "We all grew up on this [myth of Tel Hai](#)," he says. "That Trumpeldor's last words were 'It is good to die for our country.'"

Kasher believes the entire culture of the army needs to change. "It's *bad* to die for our country. That's what every single soldier needs

to hear. Don't look for opportunities to die. Sometimes you can find yourself in situations where you have to put yourself in danger, even mortal danger. But to seek that out? This is against our ethics, values, and everything we hold as important."