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On the pilot's mind

By Giora Rom

Pilots drop bombs. Pilots kill people. Pilots destroy things that took great effort to build. Pilots do all of this without seeing the results of their actions up close.

Pilots also carry out strategic goals. With their unique expertise, they serve as intermediaries between the policy determined by leaders and those targeted by that policy.

Pilots would be happy to fly missions in the Sahara Desert, or in the ice tracts of Antarctica. But not Gideon Levy's pilots, citizens of his imagined country, operating in an area where more than 10 million people are cramped between the sea and the Jordan River - conflicted, angry, worried for their children's future, each with his hands firmly around his neighbor's throat.

In his December 31 article "[Our pilots did not return safely](#)," Levy sounds like someone zooming in on a snippet of a large, complex painting that needs to be viewed from afar to get the full picture.

"In four days they killed 375 people," he writes. "They did not, and could not, distinguish between a Hamas official and his children, between a traffic cop and a Qassam launching squad, between a weapons cache and a health clinic.

"Our excellent pilots are effectively bullies now," he concludes.

The truth is that pilots are no more heroes than the tens of thousands of citizens far below them on the ground, nor do they see themselves any differently. If Levy finds it hard to figure out "what goes through their mind," as he says, I can give him a hand: "I don't want to miss. In this sweaty crowded mess, I want to hit only the ones I need to hit, and if at all possible, no one else. I don't want to miss."

Levy's narrative ("They set out to bomb young police officers' graduation ceremony") misses the big picture - that this is an existential war. According to this narrative, the Israeli pilot must be forced to face the results of his actions.

On the afternoon of October 20, 1975, the army received intelligence about a graduation ceremony being held by the Popular Resistance Committees in a godforsaken village in northern Lebanon, on the Syrian border. At exactly 5 P.M., the exact hour of the ceremony, I found myself 15,000 feet above it, leading three other pilots, each carrying eight quarter-ton bombs. I could see the village, its soccer field and the dark rectangle of the graduates of the explosives course run by Ahmed Jibril.

As my plane dove, in the second before I pushed the button to release the bombs, I saw the edges of that rectangle beginning to peel off and

seek shelter from our aircraft.

I thought about my mission during the long flight from Tel Nof Air Force Base to that distant village. I knew for certain that those proud graduates of a terror training course would be surrounded by family members and others. But I did not hesitate for a second in my responsibility to make sure the course's graduates did not apply their knowledge in Admit, Zarit, Misgav Am or any other northern border community.

I don't want to miss, I told myself, I want my bombs to strike only the dark rectangle at the center of the field. When number 4 said "Go," I saw black smoke rise from the village and I knew people had been killed, much like the ones Levy describes. Since then, I have not been to the village to check whether indeed people I did not intend to kill were killed. On the way back, over Kiryat Shmona, I rolled over and had a look at headquarters. The people looked small, like tiny dots.

I didn't go to Kiryat Shmona that night either. I will never know how many lives in that city were saved, simply because 15 minutes earlier my friends and I had been in northern Lebanon.

Maj. Gen. (res.) Giora Rom was a fighter pilot and deputy Air Force commander.

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