As I write this column, bombs and rockets fall in Tel Aviv and Gaza. Half the population of the nation of Israel has cowered in bomb shelters the past four days. The people of the Gaza territory have no bomb shelters. By the time you read this, a ground invasion may have begun.

Our instincts are to side with the weaker underdog against those with stronger power, but that would be too simple here. Both sides could have taken steps to ratchet down the tension but, instead, both continued actions that ramped up the tension.

The Palestinians in Gaza are stuck. Nearly 2 million people live in an area about twice the size of Washington, D.C. Less than 10 percent of the land can be farmed and, so, most of their food must be imported. Since both Israel and Egypt have closed their borders, Gazans are essentially trapped.

If only they would act that way!

Despite the pressing human needs in Gaza, its militants have been importing missiles. And now they have been firing them at Israel. These missiles have a longer range than before and can now reach about half the people living in Israel, which is more than 3 million.

Three weeks ago, the militants were firing just a few missiles each day -- too many for any nation that wants to live in peace. In the last 36 hours, more than 250 missiles have been launched at Israel. Despite the Israeli bombs, there is no sign the Hamas militants will stop.

On Israel’s side, their bombing did not really start until Monday, July 7. It has been intense and the death toll in Gaza has been mounting. The Israeli government accused the Palestinians of hiding their missiles behind “human shields.” Given the press of population in Gaza, there is no other place to put them.

This war does not stem from a grand strategy on either side. Instead, it results from an accidental meeting of two groups of individuals, about 10 people.

At 10 p.m. June 12, three Israeli teenagers decided to hitchhike home from their religious school at a high-security settlement in the West Bank, which is hostile Palestinian territory.

A “terrorist” just happened to drive by at that moment and offered a ride. They were kidnapped, killed and buried. No one knew they were dead because the kidnappers told no one.

The Israeli army mounted a search for the young men, believing they were still alive. This went on for three weeks as international condemnations of the kidnapping grew and the Israeli public followed the news of the search hourly.

The army’s manhunt grew increasingly aggressive. They searched West Bank homes; blocked off villages; arrested hundreds of known Hamas militants; used force against families and people who resisted; and ultimately killed six Palestinians who interfered.

Hamas was helpless to prevent these actions. So, instead, it began to fire rockets into Israel. These fell on houses and towns, caused widespread damage, and destroyed a factory in the southern city of Sderot.

After three weeks, the bodies of the three boys were found. There was a massive outpouring of grief and anger in Israel. Thousands attended the funeral and tens of thousands watched it on television.

In a revenge killing, a West Bank Palestinian teenager was kidnapped and killed. Despite anger and riots in areas around his neighborhood in the Jerusalem suburb of Shuafat, the Palestinian reaction was subdued elsewhere.

The killing was widely condemned around the world, and the Israeli prime minister promised to find the killers and bring them to justice. Earlier this week, the police arrested and charged six Israelis with the crime.

While the national and international press focused on these killings and funerals, the more serious matter was the increasing number of rockets being fired from Gaza into Israeli towns and cities, including Tel Aviv, Beer Sheva and, for the first time, Jerusalem.

When a few bombing raids from Israel did not cause Hamas to back down, the large scale attack began. Tens of thousands of reserve soldiers were called up, while tanks and troops have been massed on the borders of Gaza, ready for an invasion.

Whatever the outcome, this war will cost hundreds of lives and millions, perhaps billions, of dollars. It will solve nothing. The Gazans will remain stuck in their territory, but Israel cannot get away from them. The two peoples will remain locked together, despite their antagonism and hatred.

Was the war planned? No. No great strategists decided that now would be a great time for a battle. No military planners decided an invasion needs to take place. Instead, it results from the accidental meeting of three hitch-hiking teenage boys with terrorists in a car.

Flesher is director of UW's Religious Studies Program. Past columns and more information about the program can be found on the Web at www.uwyo.edu/relstds. To comment on this column, visit http://religion-today.blogspot.com.