

The War for Nothing

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AFTER 50 DAYS, the war is over. Hallelujah.
On the Israeli side: 71 dead, among them 66 soldiers, 1 child.

On the Palestinian side: 2,143 dead, 577 of them children, 263 women, 102 elderly. 11,230 injured. 10,800 buildings destroyed. 8,000 partially destroyed. About 40,000 damaged homes. Among the damaged buildings: 277 schools, 10 hospitals, 70 mosques, 2 churches. Also, 12 West Bank demonstrators, mostly children, who were shot.

So what was it all about?

The honest answer is: About nothing.

Neither side wanted it. Neither side started it. It just so happened.

LET US recapitulate the events, before they are forgotten.

Two young Arab men kidnapped three young Israeli religious students near the West Bank town of Hebron. The kidnapers belonged to the Hamas movement, but acted on their own. Their purpose was to exchange their captives for Palestinian prisoners. Liberating prisoners is now the highest ambition of every Palestinian militant.

The kidnapers were amateurs, and their plan miscarried from the beginning. They panicked when one student used his mobile phone and then they shot the hostages. All of Israel was in an uproar. The kidnapers have not yet been found.

The Israeli security forces used the opportunity to implement a prepared plan. All known Hamas activists in the West Bank were arrested, as well as all the former prisoners who were released as part of the deal to free the Israeli hostage Gilad Shalit. For Hamas this was the violation of an agreement.

The Hamas leadership in the Gaza Strip could not keep quiet while their comrades in the West Bank were being imprisoned. It reacted by launching rockets at Israeli towns and villages.

The Israeli government could not keep quiet while its towns and villages were bombarded. It responded with a heavy bombardment of the Gaza strip from the air.

From there on, it was just an endless festival of death and destruction. The war was crying out for a purpose.

Hamas then did something that was, in my opinion, a cardinal mistake. It used some of the clandestine tunnels which it had built under the border fence to attack Israeli targets. Israelis suddenly became aware of this danger that the army had belittled. The purposeless war acquired a purpose: It became the War Against the "Terror-Tunnels". The infantry was sent into the Gaza Strip to search out and destroy them.

Eighty thousand soldiers entered Strip. After destroying all the known tunnels, they had nothing to do except stand around and act as targets.

The next logical step would have been to move forward and conquer the entire Gaza Strip, some 45 km long and an average

of 6 km wide, with 1.8 million inhabitants. Four times larger than Manhattan island with about the same population.

But the Israeli army detested the idea of conquering the Strip for the third time (after 1956 and 1967). The last time it left, the soldiers sang "Goodbye Gaza, and not to see you again!" Predictions of military casualties were high, many more than Israeli society was ready to suffer, in spite of all the patriotic hyperbole.

The war deteriorated into an orgy of killing and destroying, with both sides "dancing on the blood", blessing every bomb and missile, completely oblivious to the suffering caused to the human beings on the other side. And still without any realizable aim.

IF CLAUSEWITZ was right about war being but a continuation of policy by other means, then every war must have a clear political aim.

For Hamas, the aim was clear and simple: Lift the blockade on Gaza.

For Israel there was none. Binyamin Netanyahu defined his aim as "Calm in return for Calm". But we had that before it all started.

Some of his cabinet colleagues demanded to "go to the end" and occupy the entire strip. The army command objected, and one cannot fight a war against the wishes of the army command. So everyone stood around waiting for Godot.

What brought about the final ceasefire agreement?

Both sides were exhausted. On the Israeli side, the feather that broke the camel's back was the plight of the settlement around the Gaza Strip, called the "Gaza envelope". Under the unceasing barrage of short-range rockets and—even worse—mortar shells that cost next to nothing, the inhabitants, mostly kibbutz members, started to move quietly to safer regions.

That was almost sacrilege. One of the founding myths of Israel was that in the 1948 war, in which the state was born, Arab villagers and townspeople ran away when they were shot at, while our settlements stood firm even in the midst of hell.

That was not entirely so. Several kibbutzim were evacuated by order of the army when their defense became impossible. In several others, women and children were sent away, while men were ordered to stay on and fight with the soldiers. But on the whole, Israeli settlements stood fast and fought.

But 1948 was an ethnic war for territory. Land evacuated was lost forever (or at least until the next war). This time, the whole rationale was different.

LIFE IN the "envelope" became impossible. Sirens sounded several times within the hour, and everybody had 15 seconds to find shelter. The clamor for evacuation became open and loud. Hundreds of families moved away. The myth was abandoned and the government was compelled to organize a mass movement. That did not look like victory.

The Palestinian side underwent a terrible ordeal. About 400 thousand people had to leave their homes. Whole families found shelter in UN buildings, several families in a room or in a corner of the courtyard, without electricity and with very little water, mothers with 6, 7 or 8 children.¹

It is almost a wonder that under these conditions, the Hamas government and command structure did function. Orders passed from hidden leaders to hidden cells, contacts were maintained with leaders abroad and between different organizations, while spy drones circled overhead and killed any civil leader or commander who showed his face.

After the action to kill the Hamas military Commander in Chief, Mohammad Deif (which succeeded or failed, we don't know), Hamas started to shoot the informers without whom such actions are impossible. (In my days as a junior terrorist, we did the same.)

But with all their remarkable ingenuity, Hamas could not go on forever. Their large stocks of rockets and mortar shells were being depleted. They also needed an end.

The result? Clearly a draw. But, as I have said before, if a small resistance organization achieves a draw against one of the mightiest military machines in the world, it has cause to celebrate—as it indeed did, last Monday, the 50th day of the War for Nothing.

WHAT DID the two sides lose?

The Palestinians sustained huge material losses. Thousand of homes were destroyed in order to break their spirit, some with some slim pretext, others without any. In the last days, the Air Force systematically brought down the luxurious high-rise buildings in the center of Gaza.

Palestinian human losses were also enormous. Israelis did not shed any tears.

On the Israeli side, human and material losses were comparatively light. Economic losses were significant, but bearable. It is the unseen losses that count.

The delegitimization of Israel throughout the world is accelerating. Millions of people have seen the daily pictures coming out of Gaza, and, consciously or unconsciously, their image of Israel has changed. For many, the brave little country has turned into a brutal monster.

Anti-Semitism, we are told, is dangerously on the rise. Israel claims to be the Nation-State of the Jewish People, and most Jews defend Israel and identify with it. The new rage against Israel sometimes looks like old-time anti-Semitism, and sometimes is.

We don't know how many Jews will be driven by anti-Semitism to Israel. Nor do we know how many Israelis will be driven by the eternal war from Israel to Germany, the US or Canada.

One tends to overlook the most dangerous aspect. A huge mass of hatred has been created in Gaza. How many of the children we saw running with their mothers from their homes will become the “terrorists” of tomorrow?

Millions of children throughout the Arab world have seen the pictures beamed daily into their homes by Aljazeera, and become bitter haters of Israel. Aljazeera is a world power. While its English-language edition tried to be moderate, the Arab edition had no brakes—hour after hour its reports showed the heartbreaking pictures from Gaza, the children killed, the homes destroyed.

On the other side, the generations-old enmity of Arab governments towards Israel has been broken. Egypt, Saudi Arabia and all the Gulf States (except Qatar) are openly collaborating now with Israel.

Can this bear political fruit in the future? It could, if our government were really interested in peace.

In Israel itself, fascism, vile and unmistakable, has raised its ugly head. “Death to the Arabs” and “Death to the Leftists” have become legitimate battle-cries. Some of this foul wave will hopefully recede, but some may remain and become a regular feature.

Netanyahu's personal fortunes are clouded. During the war his popularity ratings rose sharply. Now they are in a free fall. It is not enough to make speeches about victory. Victory must be seen. If possible, without a microscope.

WAR IS a matter of power. The reality created on the battlefield is generally reflected in the political results. If the battle ends in a draw, the political result will also be a draw.

Celebrating a similar triumph long ago, Pyrrhus, King of Epirus, remarked: “Another such victory and we will be lost!”

¹Imagine what that means: A family, poor or wealthy, has to leave its home within minutes, unable to take anything, no clothes, no money, no family albums, just to gather the children and run, while behind them the home collapses. A whole life's work and memories destroyed in seconds. The young men were long gone, living in secret underground tunnels, preparing for the crucial fight.