

All Quiet on the Southern Front

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March 17, 2012

“WHAT HAVE YOU learned in school today, my son?”
“There was no school today. There is an emergency!”

“And what have you learned from that, my son?”

ACTUALLY, QUITE a lot.

This week’s “round”, as the army likes to call it, followed a well-established pattern, as formal as a religious ritual.

It started with the assassination (or “targeted elimination”) of a hitherto unknown Palestinian resistance (“terrorist”) leader in the Gaza Strip.

The Palestinians responded with a rain of missiles, which lasted for four whole days. More than a million Israelis around Gaza stopped working and stayed with their children near their shelters or “protected areas” (meaning nothing more than relatively safe rooms in their homes.) One million Israelis roughly equate to 10 million Germans or 40 million Americans, in relation to the population.

A proportion of these rockets were intercepted in their flight by the three batteries of the “Iron Dome” anti-missile defense. There were some Israeli injured and some minor material damage, but no Israeli dead.

Israeli manned and unmanned aircraft struck and there were 26 Palestinian dead in the Gaza Strip.

After four days and nights, both sides had had enough, and Egyptian mediators achieved an unwritten Tahdiyeh (Arabic for “Quiet”).

Everything as usual.

EXCEPT FOR the details, of course.

It all started with the killing of one Zuhair al-Qaisi, the General Secretary of the “Popular Committees”. He has been in this position for only a few months.

The “Popular Committees” are a minor resistance/terrorist group, the third by size in the Strip. They are overshadowed by Hamas, which did not take part in this round, and “Islamic Jihad”, which took up the cause of the “committees” and launched most of the rockets.

The number of launches was a surprise. During the four days, 200 rockets were launched – an average of some 50 per day. 169 fell in Israel. There was no sign that the Jihad was running out of stock. Hamas, of course, is a much larger organization, with a much bigger arsenal. In the Gaza Strip, one must assume, there are now huge quantities of missiles, almost all the more sophisticated ones provided by Iran. How they made the long journey can only be guessed.

One must assume that in Hizbollah-dominated South Lebanon, the stockpiles of missiles are even greater.

On the other side (ours) the Iron Dome has chalked up a huge success, a source of great pride for the contractor, the army and the country at large.

This is a sophisticated system, made in Israel, which initially evoked a lot of skepticism. For that reason, there are at this moment only three batteries in action, each protecting one city (Ashkelon, Ashdod, Beer Sheva). A fourth battery is scheduled to be provided soon.

The system does not intercept every rocket, which would be enormously costly. Instead, the system itself calculates whether a rocket would fall in open space (and could be ignored) or on a populated area (when the interceptor would be launched), all in seconds. Of these, more than 70% were intercepted and destroyed, a great success by any reckoning.

The sting is that one of the Palestinian rockets costs only a few hundred shekels, while one single Iron Dome missile costs 315 thousand shekels. During the four days, 17.6 million shekels’ worth of missiles was spent by the Israeli side. This apart from the very high price tag of the batteries themselves.

The Air Force sorties over the Gaza Strip cost another tens of millions – one hour of flight costs some 100 thousand shekels (almost 25 thousand dollars).

THE FIRST question to be asked was therefore: was the whole exercise worthwhile?

Israelis rarely ask themselves such questions. They believe that those in charge know what they are doing.

But do they?

It all hinges on the necessity to kill al-Qaisi, even for those who believe in such killings as a solution.

Al-Qaisi was in his position as leader of the “Popular Committees” only since the assassination of his predecessor in similar circumstances. A replacement will easily be found. He may be better or worse, but will hardly make much difference.

The Minister of Defense, Ehud Barak, gave a strangely convoluted explanation for the assassination: “[al-Qaisi] was one of the heads of Popular Committees who were, it seems, busy preparing a large attack. I cannot yet say whether this attack was averted.” It seems. I cannot say.

Unofficially it was said that al-Qaisi may have been involved in sending a group of militants from Gaza to the Egyptian Sinai, to attack Israeli territory from there. Last year there was such an attack near Eilat, with several Israeli dead, al-Qaisi’s predecessor was blamed for that and killed before an investigation had even started.

So was it worthwhile to endanger the lives of so many people, send a million people to the shelters and spend tens of millions of shekels on such grounds?

My guess is that al-Qaisi was killed because an opportunity presented itself to do so - such as information on his movements.

WHO MADE the decision?

Targeted assassinations are based on information received from the Shabak (aka Shin Bet). In practice, it is this security service that makes the decision to kill people – acting as gatherer

of the information, the assessor of it, and the judge at the same time. No independent analysis of the information, no review, no judicial process of any kind. Questioning the Shabak almost amounts to treason, no politician and no journalist would dare to do so, even if he were so inclined – which he or she is not.

After the Shabak has decided to kill somebody, this is brought to a tiny group of men: the Prime Minister, the Minister of Defense, the army Chief of Staff and perhaps the officer commanding. Nobody with an independent outlook.

Did any of these people ask the relevant questions? I doubt it.

For example: Binyamin Netanyahu prides himself on his huge success in America, indeed in the entire world: he has managed to get everybody deeply concerned about the (not yet existing) Iranian nuclear bomb. The Palestinian issue has been completely wiped off the map. And here he sets in motion another round of fighting that reminds people everywhere that the Palestinian issue is alive and kicking, and that it may explode at any moment. Does that make sense even from the point of view of a Netanyahu or a Barak?

ANOTHER INTERESTING political aspect of this “round” was the role Hamas played in it, or, rather, didn’t.

Hamas rules the Gaza Strip. The Israeli government does not officially recognize this rule, but somehow still considers Hamas responsible for everything that happens in the Strip, whether

Hamas was involved or not.

Until now Hamas entered the fight whenever Israel attacked objects in Gaza. This time, it stayed outside the fray, and even emphasized this fact in telephone interviews on Israeli TV.

Why? Hamas is closely connected with the Muslim Brotherhood, which now dominates the Egyptian parliament. It is under pressure to create a unity government with Fatah in Palestine and join the PLO. Taking part in the armed fight against Israel at this moment would jeopardize this effort. The more so as the Islamic Jihad is closely connected with Iran, the rival of Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

ISRAELI TV correspondents have the annoying habit of concluding their reports with a disturbingly banal sentence. For example, a report about a fatal road accident will almost invariably end with the words: “. . . and he (or she) only wanted to get safely home.”

This week, almost all the final reports about the mess in the south ended with the words: “Quiet has returned to the South – until the next time!”

Everybody assumes that “next time” the rockets coming out of Gaza will have a greater range and perhaps reach the outskirts of Tel Aviv, and everybody in Israel hopes that the Iron Dome missile will become even more effective.

Until then, All Quiet on the Southern Front.