

The Stolen War

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IS THERE NO limit to the villainy of Hamas? Seems there isn't.

This week, they did something quite unforgivable. They stole a war.

FOR SOME weeks now, our almost new Chief of Staff, Benny Gantz, has been announcing at every possible opportunity that a new war against the Gaza Strip is inevitable. Several commanders of the troops around the Strip have been repeating this dire forecast, as have their camp-followers, a.k.a. military commentators.

One of these comforted us. True, Hamas can now hit Tel Aviv with their rockets, but that will not be so terrible, because it will be a short war. Just three or four days. As one of the generals said, it will be much more "hard and painful" (for the Arabs) than Cast Lead I, so it will not last for three weeks, as that did. We shall all stay in our shelters – those of us who have shelters, anyway – for just a few days.

Why is the war inevitable? Because of the terrorism, stupid. Hamas is a terrorist organization, isn't it?

But along comes the supreme Hamas leader, Khaled Mash'al, and declares that Hamas has given up all violent action. From now on it will concentrate on non-violent mass demonstrations, in the spirit of the Arab Spring.

When Hamas forswears terrorism, there is no pretext for an attack on Gaza.

But is a pretext needed? Our army will not let itself be thwarted by the likes of Mash'al. When the army wants a war, it will have a war. This was proved in 1982, when Ariel Sharon attacked Lebanon, despite the fact that the Lebanese border had been absolutely quiet for 11 months.¹

WHY DOES the Chief of Staff want to attack?

A cynic might say that every new Chief of Staff needs a war to call his own. But we are not cynics, are we?

Every few days, a solitary rocket is launched from the Gaza Strip into Israel. It rarely hits anything but an empty field. For months, now, no one has been hurt.

The usual sequence is like this: our air force carries out a "targeted liquidation" of Palestinian militants in the strip. The army claims invariably that these specific "terrorists" had intended to attack Israelis. How did the army know of their intentions? Well, our army is a master thought reader.

After the persons have been killed, their organization considers it its duty to avenge their blood by launching a rocket or a mortar shell, or even two or three. This "cannot be tolerated" by the army, and so it goes on.

After every such episode, the talk about a war starts again. As American politicians put it in their speeches at AIPAC conferences: "No country can tolerate its citizens being exposed to

rockets!"

But of course, the reasons for Cast Lead II are more serious. Hamas is being accepted by the international community. Their Prime Minister, Isma'il Haniyeh, is now traveling around the Arab and Muslim world, after being shut in Gaza – a kind of Strip-arrest – for four years. Now he can cross into Egypt because the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas' parent organization, has become a major player there.

Even worse, Hamas is about to join the PLO and take part in the Palestinian government. High time to do something about it. Attack Gaza, for example. Compel Hamas to become extremist again.

NOT CONTENT with stealing our war, Mash'al is carrying out a series of more sinister actions.

By joining the PLO, he is committing Hamas to the Oslo agreements and all the other official deals between Israel and the PLO. He has announced that Hamas accepts a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders. He has let it be known that Hamas would not contest the Palestinian presidency this year, so that the Fatah candidate – whoever that may be – would be elected practically unopposed and be able to negotiate with Israel.

All this would put the present Israeli government in a difficult position.

Mash'al has some experience in causing trouble for Israel. In 1977, the (first) Netanyahu government decided to get rid of him in Amman. A team of Mossad agents was sent to assassinate him in the street by spraying his ear with an untraceable poison. But instead of doing the decent thing and dying quietly from a mysterious cause, like Yasser Arafat, he let his bodyguard chase the attackers and catch them.

King Hussein, Israel's longstanding friend and ally, was hopping mad. He presented Netanyahu with a choice: either the agents would be tried in Jordan and possibly hanged, or the Mossad would immediately send the secret antidote to save Mash'al. Netanyahu capitulated, and here we have Mash'al, very much alive and kicking.

Another curious outcome of this misadventure: the king demanded that the Hamas founder and leader, the paralyzed Sheik Ahmad Yassin, be released from Israeli prison. Netanyahu obliged, Yassin was released and assassinated by Israel seven years later. When his successor, Abd al-Aziz Rantissi, was assassinated soon after, the path was cleared for Mash'al to become the Hamas chief.

And instead of showing his gratitude, he now confronts us with a dire challenge: non-violent action, indirect peace overtures, the two-state solution.

A QUESTION: why does our Chief of Staff long for a little war in Gaza, when he could have all the war he desires in Iran?

¹After the war, the myth was born that it was preceded by daily shooting. Today, almost every Israeli can "remember" the shooting – an astonishing example of the power of suggestion.

Not just a little operation, but a big war, a very very big war.

Well, he knows that he cannot have it.

Some time ago I did something no experienced commentator ever does. I promised that there would be no Israeli military attack on Iran (nor, for that matter, an American one).

An experienced journalist or politician never makes such a prediction without leaving a loophole for himself. He puts in an inconspicuous “unless”. If his forecast goes awry, he points to that loophole.

I do have some experience – some 60 or so years of it – but I did not leave any loophole. I said No War, and now General Gantz says the same in so many words. No Tehran, just poor little Gaza.

Why? Because of that one word: Hormuz.

Not the ancient Persian god Hormuzd, but the narrow strait that is the entrance and exit of the Persian Gulf, through which 20% of the world’s oil (and 35% of the sea-borne oil) flows. My contention was that no sane (or even mildly insane) leader would risk the closing of the strait, because the economic consequences would be catastrophic, even apocalyptic.

IT SEEMS that the leaders of Iran were not sure that all the world’s leaders read this column, so, just in case, they spelled it out themselves. This week they conducted conspicuous military maneuvers around the Strait of Hormuz, accompanied by the unequivocal threat to close it.

The US responded with vainglorious counter-threats. The invincible US Navy was ready to open the strait by force, if needed.

How, pray? The mightiest multi-billion aircraft carrier can be easily sunk by a battery of cheap land-to-sea missiles, as well as by small missile-boats.

Let’s assume Iran starts to act out its threats. The whole might of the US air force and navy is brought to bear. Iranian ships will be sunk, missile and army installations bombed. Still the Iranian missiles will come in, making passage through the strait impossible.

What next? There will be no alternative to “boots on the ground”. The US army will have to land on the shore and occupy all the territory from which missiles can be effectively launched. That would be a major operation. Fierce Iranian resistance must be expected, judging from the experience of the eight-year Iraqi-Iranian war. The oil wells in neighboring Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states will also be hit.

Such a war would go far beyond the dimensions of the American invasions of Iraq or Afghanistan, perhaps even of Vietnam.

Is the bankrupt US up to it? Economically, politically and in terms of morale?

The closing of the strait is the ultimate weapon. I don’t believe that the Iranians will use it against the imposition of sanctions, severe as they may be, as they have threatened. Only a military attack would warrant such a response.

If Israel attacks alone – “the most stupid idea I ever heard of,” as our former Mossad chief put it – that will make no difference. Iran will consider it an American action, and close the strait. That’s why the Obama administration put its foot down, and hand-delivered to Netanyahu and Ehud Barak an unequivocal order to abstain from any military action.

That’s where we are now. No war in Iran. Just the prospect of a war in Gaza.

And along comes this evil Mash’al and tries to spoil the chances of that, too.