

Who is Winning?

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July 19, 2014

WHAT WOULD HISTORY look like if it were written in the style of the “Solid Cliff” (a.k.a. Protective Edge) operation?

For example:

Winston Churchill was a scoundrel.

For five years he kept the population of London under the unceasing fire of the German Luftwaffe. He used the inhabitants of London as a human shield in his crazy war. While the civilian population was exposed to the bombs and rockets, without the protection of an “iron dome”, he was hiding in his bunker under 10 Downing Street.

He exploited all the inhabitants of London as hostages. When the German leaders made a generous peace proposal, he rejected it for crazy ideological reasons. Thus he condemned his people to unimaginable suffering.

From time to time he emerged from his underground hideout to have his picture taken in front of the ruins, and then he returned to the safety of his rat hole. But to the people of London he said: “*Future generations will say that this was your finest hour!*”

The German Luftwaffe had no alternative but to go on bombing the city. Its commanders announced that they were hitting only military targets, such as the homes of British soldiers, where military consultations were taking place.

The German Luftwaffe called on the inhabitants of London to leave the city, and many children were indeed evacuated. But most Londoners heeded the call of Churchill to remain, thus condemning themselves to the fate of “collateral damage”.

The hopes of the German high command that the destruction of their homes and the killing of their families would induce the people of London to rise up, kick out Churchill and his war-mongering gang, came to naught.

The primitive Londoners, whose hatred of the Germans overcame their logic, perversely followed the coward Churchill's instructions. Their admiration for him grew from day to day, and by the end of the war he had become almost a god.

A statue of him stands even today in front of the Parliament in Westminster.

FOUR YEARS later the wheel had turned. The British

and American air forces bombed the German cities and destroyed them completely. A stone did not remain on a stone, glorious palaces were flattened, cultural treasures were obliterated. “Uninvolved civilians” were blown to smithereens, burned to death or just disappeared. Dresden, one of the most beautiful cities in Europe, was totally destroyed within a few hours in a “fire storm”.

The official aim was to destroy the German war industry, but this was not achieved. The real aim was to terrorize the civilian population, in order to induce them to remove their leaders and capitulate.

That did not happen. Indeed, the only serious revolt against Hitler was carried out by senior army officers (and failed). The civilian population did not rise up. On the contrary. In one of his diatribes against the “terror pilots” Goebbels declared: “*They can break our homes, but they cannot break our spirit!*”

Germany did not capitulate until the very last moment. Millions of tons of bombs did not suffice. They only strengthened the morale of the population and its loyalty to the Führer.

AND SO to Gaza.

Everyone is asking: who is winning this round?

Which must be answered, the Jewish way, with another question: how to judge?

The classical definition of victory is: the side that remains on the battlefield has won the battle. But here nobody has moved. Hamas is still there. So is Israel.

Carl von Clausewitz, the Prussian war theorist, famously declared that war is but the continuation of policy by other means. But in this war, neither side had any clear political aims. So victory cannot be judged this way.

The intensive bombing of the Gaza Strip has not produced a Hamas capitulation. On the other hand, the intensive rocket campaign by Hamas, which covered most of Israel, did not succeed either. The stunning success of the rockets to reach everywhere in Israel has been met with the stunning success of the “Iron Dome” counter-rockets to intercept them.

So, until now, it is a standoff.

But when a tiny fighting force in a tiny territory achieves a standoff with one of the mightiest armies in the world, it can be considered a victory.

THE LACK of an Israeli political aim is the outcome of muddled thinking. The Israeli leadership, both political and military, does not really know how to deal with Hamas.

It may already have been forgotten that Hamas is largely an Israeli creation. During the first years of the occupation, when any political activity in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip was brutally suppressed, the only place where Palestinians could meet and organize was the mosque.

At the time, Fatah was considered Israel's arch-enemy. The Israeli leadership was demonizing Yasser Arafat, the arch-arch-terrorist. The Islamists, who hated Arafat, were considered the lesser evil, even secret allies.

I once asked the Shin-Bet chief at the time whether his organization had created Hamas. His answer: "*We did not create them. We tolerated them.*"

This changed only one year after the start of the first intifada, when the Hamas leader Sheikh Ahmad Yassin was arrested. Since then, of course, reality has been completely reversed: Fatah is now an ally of Israel, from the security point of view, and Hamas the arch-arch-terrorist.

But is it?

Some Israeli officers say that if Hamas did not exist, it would have to be invented. Hamas controls the Gaza strip. It can be held responsible for what happens there. It provides law and order. It is a reliable partner for a cease-fire.

The last Palestinian elections, held under international monitoring, ended in a Hamas victory both in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. When Hamas was denied power, it took it in the Gaza strip by force. By all reliable accounts, it enjoys the loyalty of the large majority in the territory.

All Israeli experts agree that if the Hamas regime in Gaza were to fall, far more extreme Islamic splinter groups would take over and plunge the Strip, with its 1.8 million inhabitants, into complete chaos. The military experts don't like that.

So the war aim, if one can dignify it as such, is not to destroy Hamas, but to leave it in power, though in a much weakened state.

But how, for God's sake, does one do that?

ONE WAY, demanded now by the ultra-right-wingers in the government, is to occupy all of the Gaza Strip.

To which the military leaders again answer with a question: And then what?

A new permanent occupation of the Strip is a military nightmare. It would mean that Israel assumes the responsibility for pacifying and feeding 1.8 million people (most of whom, by the way, are 1948 refugees from Israel and their descendants). A permanent guerrilla war would ensue. No

one in Israel really wants that.

Occupy and then leave? Easily said. The occupation itself would be a bloody operation. If the "Molten Lead" doctrine is adopted, it would mean more than a thousand, perhaps several thousands of Palestinian dead. This (unwritten) doctrine says that if a hundred Palestinians must be killed in order to save the life of one Israeli soldier, so be it. But if Israeli casualties amount to even a few dozens of dead, the mood in the country will change completely. The army does not want to risk that.

FOR A moment on Tuesday it seemed as if a cease-fire had been achieved, much to the relief of Binyamin Netanyahu and his generals.

But it was an optical illusion. The mediator was the new Egyptian dictator, a person loathed by Islamists everywhere. He is a man who has killed and imprisoned many hundreds of Muslim Brothers. He is an open military ally of Israel. He is a client for American largesse. Moreover, since Hamas arose as an offshoot of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, General Abd-al-Fatah Al-Sisi hates them with all his heart, and does not hide it.

So, instead of negotiating with Hamas, he did something exceedingly stupid: dictate a cease-fire on Israeli terms without consulting Hamas at all. Hamas leaders learned about the proposed cease-fire from the media and rejected it out of hand.

My own opinion is that it would be better if the Israeli army and Hamas negotiated directly. Throughout military history, cease-fires have been arranged by military commanders. One side sends an officer with a white flag to the commander of the other side, and a cease-fire is arranged – or not. (An American general famously answered such a German offer with "Nuts!").

In the 1948 war, on my sector of the front, a short cease-fire was arranged by Major Yerucham Cohen and a young Egyptian officer called Gamal Abd-al-Nasser.

Since this seems to be impossible with the present parties, a really honest broker should be found.

In the meantime, Netanyahu was pushed by his colleagues/rivals to send the troops into the Strip, to try at least to locate and destroy the tunnels dug by Hamas under the border fence to stage surprise attacks on border settlements.

WHAT WILL be the end of it? There will be no end, just round after round, unless a political solution is adopted.

This would mean: stop the rockets and the bombs, end the Israeli blockade, allow the people of Gaza to live a normal life, further Palestinian unity under a real unity government, conduct serious peace negotiations, MAKE PEACE.