

Israel's War Against Hamas, Part Two

January 9, 2009

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What is Israel's strategic objective in its offensive against Hamas? Israel's stated objective is to destroy Hamas' capacity to fire any more rockets at Israel's southern towns and heavily populated cities. Israel wants to establish a new balance of power in which Hamas' capacity to harass and antagonize Israel is greatly weakened. Having failed to win its war with Hezbollah in Lebanon in 2006, Israel wants to re-establish its principle of deterrence. This message of deterrence -- that Israel has regained not only its will to fight but also its vaunted military prowess-- is aimed not only at Hamas, but also at Iran.

I'm not sure we truly appreciate what life has been like for hundreds of thousands of Israelis in southern Israel since Hamas took power in Gaza and began to fire rockets into Israel. Israelis suffer from stress and anxiety from the possibility of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Why a simple trip to the corner market could be a matter of life and death. And the children, often stuck in bomb shelters for entire days at a time, are traumatized.

Most Americans agree that Israel was provoked by Hamas and had every right to respond to the increasing barrage of rocket fire on the population of southern Israel ever since Hamas unilaterally terminated a six-month ceasefire with Israel. Most of the moderate Arab regimes have been notably muted in their criticism of Israel. Jordan, Egypt, even Saudi Arabia, have actually pointed their criticism at Hamas, noting that Hamas has brought Israel's assault upon itself. While the Palestinian authority publicly criticizes Israel, privately it would like nothing more than to see Hamas defeated.

What are Israel's strategic objectives in its offensive against Hamas? Israel's stated objective is to destroy Hamas' capacity to fire any more rockets at Israel's southern towns and heavily populated cities. Israel wants to establish a new balance of power in which Hamas' capacity to harass and antagonize Israel is considerably weakened. Having failed to win its war with Hezbollah in Lebanon in 2006, Israel wants to re-establish its principle of deterrence.

Of course, this message of deterrence -- that Israel has regained not only its will to fight but also its vaunted military prowess -- is aimed not only at Hamas, but also at Iran. In order to exorcise the ghost of Israel's failure with Hezbollah, Israel wants and needs a

clear and decisive victory over Hamas. This is why I believe it is now in Israel's best interests to work with international mediators to achieve a new and much longer term ceasefire, perhaps even an armistice that will permanently lock in Israel's decisive advantage.

By agreeing to a ceasefire, Israel can demand international guarantees and new enforcement mechanisms that rockets will never fire again from Gaza. In exchange for a ceasefire, Israel can demand international monitors to guarantee tough provisions to prohibit Hamas' rearmament by smuggling in weapons through its network of tunnels underneath Gaza's border with Egypt.

I am in favor of a ceasefire because the longer Israel pushes this war to go on, the more the law of diminishing returns takes over. Israel will lose more young soldiers, it will take the lives of even more Palestinian civilians, further enraging the Arab street. It will lose the modicum of international support it currently holds. The longer the war, the more Israel loses control of the endgame.

I would add that the longer the war goes on, the greater the chance that some sort of unpredictable tragedy will occur. Israel has already lost three of its young men through friendly fire. The photos of so many lifeless Palestinian children, and the deaths of 40 Palestinians, killed by Israeli shelling of a United Nations school in Jabaliya, are terrible enough.

To their credit, the Israel defense forces make every effort to minimize the loss of civilian life, more so than any other country in the world. That being said, I cannot condone Israel's use of collective punishment against the Palestinian people. Collective punishment is morally wrong and it violates the ethical principles of the Torah.

I also believe that Hamas should be roundly condemned by the international community for its strategy of deliberately putting its own people in harm's way. This is not only a violation of international law. When Israel causes the death of Palestinian women and children because Hamas soldiers have been billeted with them, or they go to pray in a mosque that contains launchers or munitions, Hamas bears moral responsibility for intentionally endangering its own people.

Finally, as American Jews, we do not make a strong enough distinction between Hamas and the Palestinian people. Hamas is a fundamentalist Islamic movement that believes the entire Middle East belongs to them. Hamas believes that a Jewish state in the Middle East is an affront to God. Hamas wants to destroy Israel and replace it with an Islamic state. Hamas must be defeated if there is ever going to be a two-state solution to the conflict, one Palestinian and one Israeli. I have no sympathy for Hamas whatsoever. I do have sympathy for the Palestinian people who are being used as pawns by all sides. I believe we should help the Palestinian people. I will never accept the view that it is okay to make children suffer. And I believe Israel must better calibrate its actions to weaken Hamas but not to punish the Palestinian people. Israel's blockade of Gaza has created a

genuine humanitarian disaster for 1.5 million Palestinians. They suffer from lack of food, water, medicine, electricity, and fuel to heat their homes from the freezing cold.

In conjunction with the ceasefire, I believe Israel should end the economic blockade and open its border crossings with Gaza to commerce. Such a gesture of good will, done out of strength not weakness, would lift Israel's stature in the court of international opinion. It would calm the Arab street and help turn away the Palestinians from seeking the way out of their misery through Hamas' extremism. Let us defeat Hamas; let us not punish the Palestinian people.

As I wrote in yesterday's broadcast email to the congregation I have heard much concern and support from members of this congregation for Israel. Will those of us who care deeply about Israel now translate our words of support into concrete deeds of support by coming with me on an 11-day trip to Israel on August 1-11? Nothing on your part could be a more powerful and supportive gesture of solidarity with the people of Israel.

It is my hope that the ceasefire talks now taking place in Cairo between Israeli and Egyptian officials will quickly bear fruit. It is my hope that President-elect Obama and the new administration will usher in a new era of Middle East diplomacy. Next Shabbat I will talk about what the United States can do to support Israel and restart the peace process. In the meantime, let us all pray for the peace of Jerusalem!

Shabbat shalom.