

{JULY 10 2006}

A ONE-SIDED WAR

That's it. Tomorrow the World Cup games come to an end. We can congratulate the new champions and wish them *arrivederci* or *au revoir*, as the case may be. Now the public can return to less important matters, such as the daily killing and destruction, the captured soldier, the launching of Qassam rockets and everything else connected with our invasion of Gaza.

The very definition of the operation already poses a problem.

The chief of Israel's Southern Command, General Yoav Gallant, speaks of "war," and so do the media. Really?

"War" is a defined situation regulated by international law. It takes place between enemies, who are obliged to observe basic rules.

But the Israeli government asserts that it is facing not an enemy with rights, but "terrorists," "criminals" and "gangs." And those, of course, have no rights.

In a war, there are "prisoners-of-war." That applies to Corporal Gilad Shalit, who was taken prisoner in a military action, as well as to the Palestinian fighters who are held by us. But our government defines Shalit as "kidnapped" and the Palestinian prisoners as criminals.

It seems that the Jewish brain is inventing new patents (as a popular Israeli song once said). After the Unilateral Disengagement and the Unilateral Peace, we have now a Unilateral War. A war in which one side (the stronger) enjoys all the rights of a belligerent party, while the other (weaker) side has no rights at all.

A war must have an aim. What is the aim of this war?

Like George Bush's invasion of Iraq, Ehud Olmert's invasion of Gaza has an aim that changes from day to day.

It started as an operation to save Corporal Shalit. How does one free a soldier who has been taken prisoner by underground organizations, whose whereabouts are unknown? How does one free him by force without endangering his life?

The army has a solution – the same solution it has for each and every problem: apply massive force. If only we conquer, pulverize, kill and destroy more and more, the moment will come when the Palestinian people will not be able to stand the suffering

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and will demand that the underground fighters release the captured soldier. Unconditionally.

This might be called the “Harris Principle.” In World War II, the British Air-Marshall Arthur Harris (“Bomber Harris”) promised to bring Germany to its knees by turning its cities into rubble. The Germans spoke of “terror attacks.” In one of them, the city of Dresden, one of the biggest and most splendid in Germany, was razed to the ground. In the giant conflagration, between 35,000 and 100,000 civilians were burnt to death (it was impossible to count the victims after the firestorm). But quite contrary to Harris' promise, German morale did not collapse. Germany surrendered only after the last German house was taken by foot soldiers.

The Palestinian population, too, is not collapsing, in spite of its dreadful situation. It demands, almost unanimously, that the captors not release the soldiers if there is no release of “Palestinian prisoners-of-war.”

So, instead of the release of the prisoner, a new war-aim was born: to put an end to the launching of the Qassams.

That seems easy: one only has to occupy the areas from which the rockets can be launched towards Sderot or Ashkelon. But that is a Sisyphean task. The operation may well bring about a temporary reduction in launchings. But even the commanders of the operation concede that the launching will resume, and probably increase, the moment the army withdraws. Almost nobody wants the army to remain there for any length of time. The Israeli public has experienced enough not to allow itself to be sucked back into the “Gaza quagmire” again.

Minister of Housing Shitreet has a remedy: to return to Gaza “even a thousand times.” Minister of Defense Peretz speaks about a “heavy price that will be exacted from the Palestinians”—a price so terrible that the Palestinians themselves will drive the Qassam teams out. That is the view of the Chief-of-Staff. Instead of “Bomber Harris,” “Destroyer Halutz.” Not by chance, both rose through the ranks of the Air Force.

If the permanent stoppage of the Qassams is not practicable, what war-aim is left? Only one: to bring about the collapse of the Palestinian government. See: Harris Principle.

Like every single event in the 120 years of the Zionist-Palestinian conflict, this one, too, is burned into the consciousness of the two peoples in very different ways.

For most Israelis, this is another chapter in the long war against “Palestinian terrorism.” Again our brave soldiers are obliged to face the vile Palestinian murderers, who aim to throw us into the sea. Again we fight because “there is no alternative.” As Yitzhak Shamir once famously said: “The Arabs are the same Arabs and the sea is the

same sea!”

For the other side, this is a heroic stand of their finest sons against an evil and vicious enemy. One of the strongest armies in the world, equipped with the most up-to-date weaponry, is deployed against a handful of untrained fighters with primitive arms. Fighter planes, helicopter gunships, heavy tanks, artillery, missile boats, armored bulldozers and night-vision sights--all against Kalashnikovs and RPGs (light anti-tank weapons). A Palestinian Massada.

The struggle between the Palestinian militias is giving way to a new unity against the common enemy. Already on the eve of the operation, Ismail Haniyeh of Hamas agreed with Mahmoud Abbas of Fatah to accept the “prisoners' paper,” which de facto recognizes Israel within the Green Line border. Now, in the heat of battle, Fatah members clamor to join the Hamas fighters in the struggle against the invader, and the remnants of Abbas' influence are fading.

If the Israeli government carries out its public threats to kill the Palestinian Prime Minister and his ministers, Hamas will only emerge strengthened. The place of the martyrs will be filled by new leaders from among the fighters, and the Palestinians will close ranks behind them.

IN ISRAEL, the opposite may happen: the operation may well hurt the government that started it. The cruel projector of the crisis throws a hard light on them--and this light is not at all complimentary. It seems that among them there is not even one person who is more than a grey politician.

Ehud Olmert is talking himself to political death. His unending blabbing is starting to irritate--the more so as it does not contain anything but the empty clichés of the 1950s: We shall not surrender to blackmail, Terrorism will not prevail, The enemy wants to annihilate us, The murderers will not be pardoned, We have a wonderful army, Our arm is long, etc. etc.

Amir Peretz is repeating the most blood-curdling slogans of the worst of his predecessors. There is nothing left of the leader that we voted for only yesterday, the one that was going to carry out a social revolution, change the national priorities, drastically cut the military budget, bring peace nearer. All that is left is a spokesman (and not the most brilliant one) for the chief-of-staff. If my magazine, Haolam Hazeh, were still in circulation, it would certainly have included a cartoon this week showing a parrot perched on the shoulder of Dan Halutz.

Tsipi Livni, who attracted so many hopes, has just disappeared. She has no role in this drama. She has nothing to say, except the most banal platitudes. Like Olmert, she is exposed for what she is: a rightist politician who follows in the footsteps of a rightist father.

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The real ruler of Israel is Dan Halutz, a fighter-pilot who views the world below through a bombsight. His only competitor is Security Service chief Yuval Diskin. The chiefs of the army and the Security Service decide among themselves the course of the State of Israel. Olmert is, at best, the referee.

A curiosity: the names do not testify to their owners' disposition. Ehud ("likable," in Hebrew) is losing his popularity. Peretz ("breaking out") is not breaking out of the old security policy. Livni ("white") is justifying black deeds. And Halutz ("pioneer") is certainly not leading the way to anything new.

But the most curious name belongs to the commander of the operation, General Gallant. In European languages, "gallant" means both brave and chivalrous.

How will it all end?

I guess that in the end there will be no alternative but to bring about the release of the soldier by an exchange of prisoners. Our side will trumpet this as a great victory for the operation, because the Palestinians will have to be satisfied with a smaller number of released prisoners than they originally demanded. The Palestinians will boast that they have won a glorious victory, because Israel will release prisoners after all the highfaluting slogans starting with "Never . . ." (As has been said: Never say never.)

If we want it, the release of the soldier could be combined with a larger package: a mutual armistice, a stop to the launching of Qassams, in return for a complete withdrawal from the Gaza strip, the termination of the "targeted killings" and the release of the Hamas leaders recently arrested.

A short armistice can lead to a long one and the start of a serious dialogue.

Is the Olmert government capable of this, after all the arrogant and swaggering boasts? Are they even interested in it, after committing themselves to "Unilateral Convergence" and the annexation of territories?

Probably not. On the other hand, Israeli public opinion might learn a lesson from the results of the "unilateral disengagement" and this unilateral war. The Israeli peace movement must help to bring this about.