

## The High Cost of Disregarding the Strategy of Hamas

-- By Joel Fishman, *Makor Rishon*, February 6, 2009

On January 21, Defense Minister Ehud Barak gave an extensive interview on Israel Television in which he discussed aspects of the recent military campaign in Gaza. Barak repeatedly insisted that the Israel Defense Forces achieved all of their objectives in Operation Cast Lead and had recovered their deterrent ability. When leading interviewer Ayala Hasson asked him about certain government policies which may have necessitated Israel's invasion of Gaza, Barak stonewalled. He refused to relate to the past and said that he was willing to discuss only the future. While he reiterated that Israel achieved its objectives in Operation Cast Lead, Barak never quite explained exactly what the army's objectives were.

Barak's behavior reminded the author of his term as prime minister during the summer of 2000, at the time of the failed Camp David talks and the outbreak of the Second Intifada. He had another mantra then: "There is no military solution. There is only a political settlement." Somehow, Barak convinced his entire cabinet to chant this one, like the animals of the barnyard in George Orwell's *Animal Farm*. In the past two weeks, Barak has added a new slogan to his repertoire: "Never has Hamas taken such a harsh blow!"

The fact that the Minister of Defense and other government ministers choose to dodge the big questions reflects a lack of critical thinking and a flawed set of priorities. Indeed, this is one of the problems with which the Winograd Commission tried to deal with after the Second Lebanon War of 2006. Although the quality of the army has greatly improved over the past two years, it is evident that Israel's leaders have not caught up. Simply, they fail to grasp that the objective of Hamas is to destroy Israel and that, if this movement is not arrested in its early stages, it will be a much more serious threat in the future. Their thinking does not reflect a strategic vision or an awareness of the challenge of revolutionary war in its political and military forms. From the point of view of business management and decision-making, the threat of Hamas represents a problem for which a long term solution should have been found. Further, we must ask why the government did not seek a long term solution to this challenge, instead of improvising and trying to "buy calm" for the short term. Briefly, we may ask why the government failed to achieve a decisive victory over its mortal enemy, the Iranian-backed Hamas.

Beyond the fact that the government did not secure the benefits of a decisive victory, it failed to reduce Hamas to a state of demoralization and despair, which is a crucial aspect of winning. Several great military theorists and soldiers have described the importance of the "moral dimension," and morale. For example, Napoleon declared that the "'moral' is to the physical as three is to one." In recent times, Ariel Sharon, one of Israel's great generals, expanded on this principle. Describing his early career, he identified the psychological goals which he intended to achieve through the use of armed force:

During these years my ideas about the function of these operations [the 101 paratroop raids] changed too. I came to view the objective not simply as retaliation or even deterrence in the usual sense. It was to create in the Arabs a psychology of defeat, to beat them every time and to beat them so decisively that they would develop the conviction they could never win.

....As I saw it, our objective had to be to neutralize the Arabs' desire to make war on us, to destroy their will to fight. That, and not retaliation per se, was the ultimate goal of the paratroop raids, a goal that I understood would take a long time to achieve. But with our neighbors bent on harming us to the full extent of their powers, I, for one, could see no other resolution....<sup>1</sup>

When the Olmert-Livni-Barak government terminated Operation Cast Lead without victory, they forfeited the advantage of morale. Proof of this may be found in the fact that the government is now negotiating indirectly with Hamas for a new cease-fire. Hamas still possesses sufficient strength to negotiate, stating its terms and making its demands. To make things worse, figures such as Tony Blair suggest that Hamas be viewed as a party to any arrangement with the Palestinians. One thing is sure: Israel's failure to insist on an unconditional surrender means that we have bought only a temporary truce. Because the enemy's real objective is the defeat of Israel, one day when it is least comfortable for us, Hamas will renew the war with new allies and more sophisticated weapons.

For Hamas, all that is necessary to win was to survive. Hamas has claimed victory, and in a sense, it is correct. Most of its leadership and its fighters emerged alive and well from their hiding places. And, in this type of war, survival is the enemy's most important objective. According to Chairman Mao, survival is the foremost objective of any guerilla movement or of an organization which wages revolutionary war.<sup>2</sup>

In addition, Israel missed an opportunity to help the population of Gaza. As a result of its inability to offer a political alternative to Hamas, the population of Gaza will continue to be dependent on this organization. The ability of Hamas to supervise the rebuilding of Gaza and to distribute patronage will provide an excellent opportunity for its recovery and for the consolidation of its political hold on the population.

An analysis of the current situation clearly indicates that the government's response was insufficient. In the long term, Israel will have to pay the price for its leaders' decision to opt for a quick fix, instead of a solution which would have better assured Israel's security over the long term.

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<sup>1</sup> Ariel Sharon with David Chanoff, *Warrior; An Autobiography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989): 120.

<sup>2</sup> Mao Tse-Tung, "The Basic Principle of War is to Preserve Oneself and Destroy the Enemy," Chapter II of "Problems of Strategy in Guerrilla War against Japan," May 1938, in *Selected writings of Mao Tse-Tung* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1967), II: 81,82.