

Not “War,” Not “Victory” — Not Even “Deterrence”

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It is no secret that most commentators on the recent events in Gaza are former and current senior military officials and journalists, who, in fact, are serving as unofficial spokespersons for Israel’s defense establishment. When they report on what is happening, or provide forecasts of what they believe will occur, they are still influenced by the accepted military thinking and resort to the use of accepted military jargon. They all regularly employ familiar terms such as “war,” “victory” and “deterrence.” However, in the case of the ongoing clash between the IDF, Hamas and other Palestinian organizations in Gaza and the West Bank, traditional military thinking and the use of these terms is inappropriate.

What is occurring now between Israel and the Palestinians in Gaza is not a “war” in the conventional sense, despite the claim that a process of “Hizbullazation” is underway in Gaza, which apparently means that a state-sponsored militia exists. The result, according to this claim, is a clash between two armies that are engaged in a traditional struggle using the accepted rules for these types of engagements. In actual fact, this is an outbreak of violence between an army established and operated by the State of Israel and a well-organized fighting force controlled by a political–military organization.

In order to properly evaluate what has occurred, is occurring and will occur between Israel and the Palestinians in Gaza, it is important to avoid comparing this violence with wars such as those that occurred between the US and Britain and their allies on the one side, and Nazi Germany and its allies on the other, or between Israel and Egypt. It would be more appropriate to compare this situation with the two-sided struggle in Ireland, the ongoing conflict between the Sri Lankan army and the Tamil Tigers, the strife in Kosovo, or, of course, the struggle between Israel and Hizbullah.

In none of these cases was the result a military “victory” for the established state. Of particular importance is the comparison to what occurred in Ireland. In that case, the conflict did not end in a military victory for the large, well-organized, and heavily armed British forces. On the contrary, that struggle ended in an agreement between the two warring sides, one of which had been labeled a terror organization. In the other cases mentioned above, and in many other similar situations, the armies of sovereign states, no matter how efficient or well armed, were unable to achieve victories. It is almost certain that Israel and the IDF will not vanquish or totally extirpate Hamas and the other terror organizations in Gaza. Therefore, in the Israel–Gaza case, too, it is preferable that Israeli politicians, military officers and commentators avoid thinking in terms of a traditional victory and even refrain from using it where Israelis and Palestinians are concerned.

One of the objectives mentioned by politicians and various Israeli commentators with respect to Israel’s sought-after “victory” is the future deterrence of the Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank. To the credit of some of these spokespersons, it must be said that they are aware (and in their reports they so note) that it will be very hard to totally destroy Hamas or compel its leaders in Gaza and Damascus to explicitly admit that they are the losers in this clash. Nonetheless, they do claim that it is possible to cause the Palestinians not to repeat past patterns of behavior, and that complete calm will prevail in the area. According to these individuals, Israel’s actions are both justified and effective because the end result will be real and enduring deterrence.

On the other hand, it is clear that it will prove impossible to make Hamas disappear and to prevent its violent actions in the future. This observation is again based on the similarity between the Israeli–Palestinian case and the conflicts of similar organizations around the world. In no other case have military measures succeeded in deterring insurgents from additional attempts to achieve their goals through violent means.

Everything said above reinforces the claim of those who suggest that the only way to solve the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians is not via military action alone, which can only bring deterrence and quiet in the very short term. Therefore, support should be given to all those who maintain that at some point it will become imperative to engage in direct or indirect dialogue with Hamas and to recognize the political status of this organization. And even if a new state of calm should be achieved, it is incumbent upon us to remember that the potential for a new outbreak of violence continues to loom large.