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Operation Guardian of the Walls: The Need for an Integrated Multi-Front Strategy

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The State of Israel is engulfed in a multi-front event: religious-nationalist tensions in Jerusalem, rioting in mixed Jewish-Arab communities, ongoing fighting with Hamas and the Gaza Strip terrorist groups, and violence on the Israeli-Lebanese border. To deal with this complex event most effectively, a multi-front and multi-disciplinary strategic outlook is required to serve as a means of planning and managing the respective fronts, relating both to the present and to the future. The flames in Israel’s mixed towns must be lowered. The current tensions should not be cast as a civil war, as this plays into how an extremist minority on both sides frames the events. In parallel, the campaign against Hamas must be managed with the knowledge that a military achievement has its limits. The objective is to impose Israel’s terms for a cessation of hostilities and to prevent Hamas’s dominating in the Palestinian arena, while denying its blackmail power and controlling imports of resources to the Strip so they cannot be used for future military buildup. The West Bank must be kept outside the escalation cycle, through security coordination with the Palestinian Authority. Israel should formulate an objective centering on a renewal of the political process with the Palestinian Authority, even if that boils down to incremental transition arrangements only. In order to engender positive cognitive diplomacy for Israel internationally, video clips should be disseminated that convey the Israeli narrative at this time.

The State of Israel is engulfed in a multi-front event: religious-nationalist ferment in Jerusalem, rioting in mixed Jewish-Arab communities, continued hostilities with Hamas and the Gaza Strip terrorist groups, and violence on the Israeli-Lebanese border. This array of events unfolded in a way that ostensibly suggested a new Palestinian strategy: a campaign to protect Muslim holy sites and to prevent Palestinians being dispossessed of their homes. Hamas did not unleash this campaign, but it elected to ride the wave of disturbances that erupted in Jerusalem – on the Temple Mount /al-Aqsa compound, at Damascus Gate, and in Sheikh Jarrah. The organization presented Israel with an ultimatum and carried out its threat when Israel did not meet its demands, launching rockets at Jerusalem and barrages deep within the Israeli interior, and in addition it encouraged the incitement that inflamed the Arab street in Israel with a view to undermining coexistence in the country.
The new features of the multi-front confrontation include: multiple active elements on the Palestinian side – in Jerusalem, the Gaza Strip, in the West Bank, and mixed cities and towns in Israel; the firm linkage between various active arenas, with the main motivating force being religious nationalism; and the broad and simultaneous spread of events. Hamas seeks to position itself as the leading element in the Palestinian camp, the manager of a multi-front and multi-dimensional campaign, in active terms and clearly in cognitive terms of public perception.

The religious-nationalist fervor is the element that ignited following the events in Jerusalem, mainly at al-Aqsa (the Temple Mount), which is a consensus issue for all streams of the Palestinian camp. The al-Aqsa riots, and mainly the entry by police forces into the mosque, stoked the sense among young Arabs that Israel was pushing them out of the Muslim holy sites. Augmenting this were fundamental problems endemic to Arab society in Israel, the outcome of years of neglect and marginalization: structural discrimination between the Jewish and Arab publics in mixed towns; a trend of nationalist Jewish groups penetrating mixed towns, which is perceived among Arabs as a settlement enterprise; surging violence and crime in Arab society in Israel, which can easily be directed against Jews; and finally – the over-extension and weakness of the Israel Police, given the expansion and entrenchment of uncontrolled and ungoverned enclaves, especially in Arab towns in Israel.

Underlying all this is a need to acknowledge the hybrid identity of the Arab public in Israel, and mainly how it is manifested among the young people. The younger generation identifies chiefly as Muslim Arabs, as Israelis entitled to full civil rights, and as Palestinians who support the Palestinian national struggle for self-determination. Amidst this, their conduct is affected by the touching of the nerve of religious-nationalist identity, and they see themselves as the defenders of al-Aqsa and Jerusalem.

As for the Gaza Strip front, Hamas has portrayed itself as defender of al-Aqsa and Jerusalem, undeterred about launching salvoes of rockets at Jerusalem and into the heart of Israel, including targeting Tel Aviv, which hits a raw nerve; incited and ignited younger Arabs in Israel so that they take part in the riots that spiraled into what were essentially anti-Jewish pogroms; proved that it is the movement leading the Palestinian camp, while undermining the relevance of the Palestinian Authority – both in the internal Palestinian arena and in the struggle against Israel; delivered an ultimatum to Israel, saying that if it were to go unmet rockets would be launched toward Jerusalem and the center of the country, and carried out that threat with precision; disrupted and perhaps even cut off the process of the Israeli Islamist party coming closer to the ranks of government; surprised
Israel, where there was a general assessment that Hamas was not interested in escalation and would thus be deterred from launching massive salvoes at the center of the country.

Except that a turnaround followed. From this stage onward, the blows to Hamas became more painful and prominent. Attention was in fact diverted from what was happening in Jerusalem to the Gaza Strip – contrary to the Hamas message, whereby al-Aqsa was the focus of events. The IDF has focused so far on hitting the military wing of Hamas and Islamic Jihad: attacking the rocket production and assembly infrastructures and the command and control bunkers, with severe damage to the infrastructure of the underground tunnels which are a base for Hamas fighters, and using pinpointed attacks to eliminate the organizations’ commanders. At this stage, Israel still enjoys political grace internationally, which allows it to maintain a massive assault Gaza’s military targets and symbols. Inevitably this inflicts growing destruction on Gaza, while continuing to exact a price on continued rocket fire into Israeli territory and prolonging the campaign.

**Multi-Front Strategy Required**

To contend with the complex event most effectively, a strategic, multi-front, and multi-disciplinary strategy is required that relates both to the present and to the future, and drives the activity on the respective fronts. The Israeli system lacks strong integrative capabilities, both on the inter-organizational level and on the level of research and planning for the campaign in the various arenas, while studying the ramifications between them. The current combined event constitutes a "red light" and demands appropriate preparation of the political-operational infrastructure.

First and foremost, the flames in the mixed cities of Israel must be lowered, so that the riots and enlistment of additional groups from both sides to the circle of violence are contained. To that end, a civil emergency must be declared, with police forces, backed by Border Police, concentrated against the rioters – not only the Arabs, but also the Jewish extremists, who are incited over social media channels, including by rank-and-file politicians, and are stoking the flames – and mass arrests of lawbreakers on all sides conducted. Similarly, it is vital to enlist the Arab leadership – local and national – in a call for restraint and to give it a platform that will allow it to have its say in favor of calm.

Furthermore, notwithstanding the backdrop of the severity and scope of the incitement and the violence among groups throughout Israel, both Arab and Jewish, it is a mistake to portray the current tension as a civil war. An extremist minority on both sides that unleashed the riots and mayhem must be denied the ability to dictate how the events are framed.
In parallel, the campaign against Hamas in Gaza should be managed while looking at its ramifications for the domestic realm and understanding that there is a limit to military achievement when it comes to Hamas. The objective is to impose Israel’s terms for a cessation of hostilities and to create improved conditions for a future arrangement that will deny Hamas of its powers of blackmail and extortion and control imports of resources to the Strip so they cannot be channeled toward renewed military buildup. To this end, the Israeli public must continue its responsible behavior. The number of casualties and extent of the damage also have significance for the cost-benefit calculation that will be made at the end of the current campaign. In order to bolster positive cognitive public diplomacy for Israel in the domestic and international realms, video clips should be disseminated that convey the Israeli narrative at this time. In tandem, the incitement disseminated on the web, which aims to foment hostility between the Arab and Jewish sectors in Israel, should be combated.

At the same time, it is important that the West Bank remain outside the escalation cycle, through security coordination with – and compensation for – the Palestinian Authority. This will serve to highlight that PA policies yield gains for the Palestinian public, especially in contrast to the damage Hamas wreaks on it.

Finally, the belief that the normalization deals with Arab countries would shunt the Palestinian problem aside on the local, regional, and international agenda – the issue already commanded relatively limited attention – has now been unequivocally dispelled. The challenges posed by the Israeli-Palestinian issue are quite extant and destined to resurface from time to time, and thus require Israel to conduct renewed strategic, multi-systemic thinking. Israel should formulate an objective that centers on renewing the political process with the Palestinian Authority, even if there is no expectation or vector to advance a comprehensive accord, but rather, incremental transition arrangements that aim to improve the security and civil reality in the conflict zone and prevent Hamas from taking over the Palestinian agenda. In this framework, Jordan should be restored to its role as a moderating element and a partner in arrangements between Israel and the Palestinian Authority.