

Protective Edge

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The government has a moral obligation to provide its citizens with basic security; indiscriminate rocket fire on civilians must not be tolerated

Despite the military escalation with Gaza, Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon had for the past several days articulated and carried out a policy of restraint. On Tuesday, the prime minister said the time had come to “take the gloves off” against Hamas, and Operation Protective Edge (Tsuk Eitan, in Hebrew) was launched.

It aims to stop the rocket fire from the Strip and restore calm to the South.

Unlike say prime minister Ehud Olmert in the 2006 Second Lebanon War, or current members of the security cabinet such as Foreign Minister Avigdor Liberman and Economy Minister Naftali Bennett, Netanyahu has shown an inclination for containment and caution over retaliation in response to the provocations of Islamist terrorist organizations such as Hamas and Hezbollah.

His caution is not just, or principally, the result of pressure being applied by the administration of US President Barack Obama, though that is probably a factor.

But while Israel has pledged to “answer quiet with quiet,” Hamas seems determined to make a bid for Palestinians’ and the Arab world’s empathy by dragging Israel into a military confrontation that already has turned bloody and might well be prolonged.

Tens of thousands of Israelis in the South are living in fear as well over 100 rockets have hit Israel in recent days. The Iron Dome system has intercepted long-range Grad rockets over Ashdod and Netivot. Beersheba joined Ashdod, Ashkelon and other locales in canceling summer camps and special education activities that cannot be conducted inside fortified structures.

Assemblies of more than 300 (at first it was 500) people within 40 km. of the Strip have been banned, to minimize casualties in case a rocket or a mortar shell hits.

Thousands of residents of the South have been asked to stay within 15 seconds of a bomb shelter. Ben-Gurion University of the Negev in Beersheba canceled all tests scheduled for the rest of the week. Sapir Academic College outside Sderot has suspended classes. Rockets have hit as far away from Gaza as Kiryat Malachi.

Hamas, meanwhile, has vowed to expand the range of its rocket attacks to Tel Aviv and has rejected any talk of deescalation. Until now, there were many factors mitigating against Hamas attacking on a large scale.

The terrorist organization has been severely weakened by a number of recent developments, from the loss of its Iranian and Syrian patrons, to Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's destruction of the lifeline tunnels from Sinai that connected the Gaza Strip to goods, materials and weapons from the outside world, to the lack of financial support from Qatar, to Saudi Arabia's antagonism toward the Muslim Brotherhood and, as an extension, toward Hamas. But according to **Benedetta Berti**, a fellow at the **Institute for National Security Studies** in Tel Aviv, Hamas is stepping up rocket attacks on Israel to boost its popularity.

"After every armed struggle, Hamas's popularity goes up," **Berti** says.

Because Israel is so widely vilified in the Arab world, Hamas gains support by attacking Israeli civilians. If innocent Palestinian civilians are inadvertently injured or killed in Gaza as a result of Israeli retaliation, the benefits to Hamas are compounded.

This is a sick dynamic. But it is also a risky one for Hamas because it rests on the assumption Israel will remain relatively restrained and the damage to Hamas will be manageable. In virtually every scenario, **Berti** does not see Hamas losing its hegemony in Gaza to Salafi groups or to Islamic Jihad. But the terrorist organization could very well be severely weakened.

There are signs that Netanyahu has no desire for full-scale war. Indeed, Liberman's decision on Monday to break up Yisrael Beytenu's partnership with the Likud was ostensibly at least partly the result of the prime minister's refusal to take more aggressive military action in Gaza. Liberman had been calling to reconquer the Strip.

In any event, the government has a moral obligation to provide its citizens with basic security. Indiscriminate rocket fire on civilians must not be tolerated.

Whatever means necessary – but no more – should be used to bring life back to normal for the South's residents.

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