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With Resolve, Good Judgment, and Deliberate Speed

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The Israeli public and its decision makers understand that slogans such as “eliminating Hamas” or “talking to Hamas” will not win a war or resolve the Palestinian problem. Indeed, the objectives of Operation Pillar of Defense are carefully defined: to restore Israel’s deterrence vis-à-vis Hamas by dealing a severe blow to the Palestinian terrorist organizations in the Gaza Strip and denying them the use of their strategic array of long range rockets. The operation began on November 14, 2012 with impressive military and intelligence success, and although Hamas’s arsenal of strategic rockets was not fully destroyed, it seems that the goals of the operation have been almost fully attained. The experience of the Second Lebanon War and Operation Cast Lead has shown that it takes some time until the blow registers and has an effect on the decision makers of the other side.

Ending the operation will also require charting a smart and responsible course: continuing the fighting will allow the IDF to damage Hamas more deeply and prepare for the possibility of a ground incursion, but simultaneously it is necessary to look for opportunities to end the round of fighting given what has already been achieved.

Egypt has an important role to play in facilitating an exit strategy, and Egypt’s initial reaction is no reason to panic. If Egypt truly desires the status of an influential regional power, it must maintain lines of communication with Israel and preserve its role as a mediator capable of ending the round of escalation. Recalling the Egyptian ambassador to Israel is not a departure from Egypt’s traditional responses to events of this type. Egypt recalled its ambassador during the First Lebanon War and after the first helicopter attack during Operation Defensive Shield in 2002. The decision to send a delegation to Gaza led by Prime Minister Hisham Kandial testifies to the Egyptian desire to strengthen its status as a mediator and broker a ceasefire as soon as possible. The leaders in both Jerusalem

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and Cairo would do well to contain existing frustrations and disagreements to allow constructive Egyptian mediation for ending this chapter quickly.

Conventional wisdom has generally said that fighting on one front would in all likelihood lead to the opening of a second front, and that the chances for having the "luxury" of fighting on one front only – as during the Second Lebanon War and Operation Cast Lead – are slim. But Syria is beset by a civil war and it seems unlikely that the Syrian army, busy fighting for the survival of the Assad regime and combating against the rebels brutally and without compromise, will divert forces to opening another front – dangerous to Syria – against Israel. Hizbollah too is more preoccupied with events in Syria than with developments in the Gaza Strip. The threat to Hizbollah's status within Lebanon, the damage to its legitimacy, and its low standing in the Sunni world because of its support for Assad reduce the probability it will ignite the northern front. Nonetheless, the IDF must be prepared for such an eventuality.

Washington and London understand that Hamas is a terrorist organization and that just as in Operation Cast Lead, it was Hamas that decided on the timing of the fighting by launching massive rocket attacks on Israel. Israel has received noteworthy support from the United States. President Obama and US Ambassador to the UN Susan Rice (a leading candidate to replace Secretary of State Clinton) reaffirmed Israel's right to defend its southern citizens. Similarly, Britain's call for the end of fighting and denunciation of Hamas attacks on Israeli cities and towns indicate the extent to which Israel succeeded in attaining its goals without having to pay a steep political price.

Operation Pillar of Defense is legitimate both morally and legally. Israel showed restraint for a long time, but the intolerable disruption of the lives of one million citizens in the south, Hamas's decision to join the more extreme terrorists operating in the Gaza Strip instead of restraining them, and the two attempts to attack IDF forces on sovereign Israeli territory – one, a booby trapped tunnel, and two, direct fire at an Israeli army jeep on the east side of the border – required a response. It is the state's obligation to defend its citizens and sovereignty. This is not about a targeted assassination or revenge: such words simply have no place in describing the reality of the southern front. Rather, it is about a confrontation between two armies: the IDF and the Palestinian terrorist army. It is about attacking senior commanding officers in the enemy's ranks and destroying the enemy's strategic arms caches.

At the same time, the Gaza Strip is but one front on the greater Palestinian arena, and therefore the long term solution is to be found in a total view of the two comprising pieces, the Palestinian Authority and Hamas. In the absence of a political process, and when Israel's policy consists of giving the moderates in the Palestinian camp the cold

shoulder, Israel's legitimacy on the international arena will erode the longer the operation lasts, especially if there are widespread casualties to Palestinian civilians. Therefore, the overall Israeli strategy must include some carrots to the moderates in the PA in order to strengthen them, and powerful sticks to the extremist terrorists in order to weaken them.

At the moment, it is necessary to make it clear to Hamas that Israel has not yet realized its potential for damaging it: the Israeli air force has hundreds more targets for attack. However, it would be best to avoid full occupation of the Gaza Strip. The disengagement from Gaza was an important strategic move serving the security of the State of Israel, and it should not be undermined. Returning to a situation of controlling one and a half million Palestinians (in addition to those in the West Bank) would be a severe strategic mistake. But in case Hamas does not allow the fighting to end, the IDF must be prepared for a large scale ground offensive in the Gaza Strip. As a first step, it is possible to raid the border areas, destroy Hamas's tunnels and strongholds, divide the Gaza Strip, and block future routes of terrorist reinforcement.

Israel must demonstrate its determination to expand the systemic damage to Hamas in order to increase the pressure on it and renew IDF deterrence. Hamas's conduct in the Gaza Strip is in many respects that of a state, and Israel must take advantage of this situation to demand that it act with statesmanlike responsibility. At the same time, it must look for opportunities to end the fighting once the objectives of the operation are attained.

