



War: The School of Life

By Maj. Gen. (res.) Gershon Hacoheh

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The potential for public panic over the tunnel threat is greater than we think. We have trouble recognizing that there are threats for which we have no ideal solution. It is unreasonable to expect a perfect response for every threat during wartime.

The public political discourse that has been going on for weeks over the state comptroller's report on 2014's Operation Protective Edge is more important to us as a nation than what is discussed in the report itself. The debate over the report's findings has been blown out of proportion regarding two main issues: the terror tunnels as a "strategic threat"; and the conduct of the Diplomatic-Security Cabinet under Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's leadership.

The tunnels are a tactical threat to which even today, despite significant advances, there is only a complex and incomplete response. It is true that the tools our forces had at their disposal during the operation were far from perfect. The investigation conducted by Maj. Gen. Yossi Bachar was presented to the General Staff near the end of the war, and it pointed to the main lessons to be learned and corrections to be made. It is not because of this that there is potential for public panic over the tunnel threat.

We have before us something deeper that is worth acknowledging. We have trouble recognizing that there are threats for which we cannot provide an impenetrable security solution. We need to examine how we developed the overreaching expectation of the national leadership and the security forces that they manage wars with complete responses for every threat.

Let us look in the mirror for a moment. Over the past two decades, Israeli security doctrine has undergone a fundamental change. We have gone from placing our hopes in the superiority of the IDF, and the spirit and dedication of its soldiers, to placing our hopes in our technological advantage. The tunnel threat we face gave expression to the opposite trend: our enemies worked for two decades to develop their preparedness for sacrifice and achieve their primitive potential, including by digging tunnels.

This is a particularly difficult problem for those who consider the idea of physical separation from the Palestinians strategic and security gospel. The premise of separation is: "They are there and we are here, and between us, there is a fence." But the advocates of separation must provide convincing security solutions for future threats to our spatial arrangement.

The logic of territorial separation gives way to the tunnel threat. The tunnel threat in Gaza thus gives symbolic expression to the threat to the relevance of the Israeli security perspective.

Also, regarding deficiencies in the cabinet's management that are addressed in the comptroller's report: This issue must be clarified by looking broadly at the complex phenomenon of war. Yesh Atid leader Yair Lapid, who as finance minister was a member of the cabinet during the Gaza war, recently wrote: "Israel entered Operation Protective Edge without defining for itself its desired result, what the exit strategy would be, and what the time frame would be."

It is certainly irresponsible to begin a project without outlining an inclusive and well-defined planning framework. However, we tend to ignore the significant uncertainties inherent in managing a war. In the great school of war, it is not possible to describe the outcome from the beginning.

According to accepted strategic planning concepts, Christopher Columbus would have been judged a failure, as he did not complete his goal of reaching India. Did he fail? War, more so than sailing off into the horizon, is an event that generates change – so much so that it can shake up the global system by an unforeseeable magnitude. The conditions for change are based on friction. Until you begin a war, there is no way to know how things will end.

The basic conditions upon which expectations for the end of a campaign are based can change as the campaign itself changes once operations begin. So too might the outline for the political uses of the campaign's achievements. From this perspective, war is a different phenomenon from any other kind of challenge that involves the planning and management of a production line.

Here is where the cabinet comes into play. In reviewing the ongoing campaign, the cabinet must study it carefully, not just in terms of the forces' operational progress as compared with the plan, but also in trying to identify twists in the campaign that could have an impact on the strategic goal test: the test of the ability to achieve what we seek and prevent that which we seek to prevent.

The president of the US manages wars in an intimate group that does not include his political opponents. Israel's government, on the other hand, has suffered since the War of Independence from a structure in which the prime minister finds himself prevented from fully disclosing all of his considerations to cabinet members. You cannot analyze the prime minister's conduct with the cabinet during Operation Protective Edge without considering the fundamental limitation on holding an open strategic debate. After all, the basic approach to dealing with Hamas rule in Gaza is tied to the basic approach to the solution to the Palestinian issue.

For those working towards a two-state solution under the Clinton parameters, a total victory over Hamas leadership was desirable during Protective Edge. For them, Hamas in Gaza presents an obstacle to the establishment of a single Palestinian state under the leadership of the Palestinian Authority.

For those seeking another framework, however, the desired goal in the Gaza war was completely different. The situation in Gaza in the wake of the disengagement – with the disconnect it created between Gaza and Judea and Samaria, perceived to be an Israeli interest worth preserving – prompted the desire among some to avoid any operation that would undo this accomplishment. Should we offer the Gaza Strip to Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas on a silver platter, purchased with the blood of our soldiers?

This was the fundamental question underpinning cabinet debate on the goal of the war in Gaza, and it formed the basis of the dilemma in deciding between a victory over Hamas and the achievement of deterrence via a broad military campaign. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and former Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon's stance on this question was clear and consistent: they wanted to take forceful action to achieve deterrence in order to establish better security conditions, but to avoid occupying the Gaza Strip or toppling the Hamas regime.

In this respect, a discussion on the cabinet's conduct during the operation must clarify, among other things, what the practical expectations were of cabinet leadership. We must recognize that, given the complexity of the institutional circumstances within which the cabinet must conduct itself, a prime minister

cannot reveal the entirety of his strategic assumptions. This has been the case since the War of Independence, but the dominant personality of Israel's first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, particularly in his management of security issues, compensated for disagreements within the government.

Political and media discussions of the report display assumptions that should be open to critical evaluation. They are based on models from the academic world. In the face of the ideal order determined by the standards of academia, another point of view from the school of life is required – one driven by basic respect for the difficulties and complexity of reality.

Maj. Gen. (res.) Gershon Hacoen is a senior research associate the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies. He served in the IDF for 42 years, commanding troops in battle on the Egyptian and Syrian fronts. He was a Corps commander, and commander of the IDF Military Colleges.

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