

The politics of air strikes

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The operation in Gaza is just a few days old, but Israel's leaders already seem confused about the objective. Echoing the lack of strategic clarity that characterized the conduct of the Second Lebanon War, our decision-makers have wasted little time in offering a series of muddled, and often contradictory, assertions regarding the goal of the present campaign against Hamas.

This does not bode well for the days and weeks to come.

Speaking in the Knesset on Monday, Defense Minister Ehud Barak was adamant, declaring that "we have an all-out war against Hamas and its kind." This would clearly seem to indicate the IDF intends to obliterate the terrorist movement and remove it from power. After all, what else could "all-out war" mean, other than reentering Gaza and flushing out the Hamas regime?

But Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, in US television interviews on Sunday, offered an entirely different perspective. On NBC's *Meet the Press*, she insisted that "our goal is not to reoccupy the Gaza Strip." And when asked by Fox News if Israel was planning to topple the Hamas regime, Livni said, "Not now." But wait, it gets better.

Vice Premier Haim Ramon told Channel 10 television the other day that the present operation would only cease once Hamas is removed from power. "We will stop firing if someone takes responsibility for what happens there - anyone except Hamas," he insisted.

So which is it? Is the current campaign aimed at removing Hamas or simply delivering a blow to its terrorist infrastructure? It would be comforting to think the different messages being offered are all part of a well thought-out plan aimed at confusing the enemy.

Comforting, but extremely naïve. For if past experience is any guide, the more likely scenario is that the government does not have a clear sense of what it hopes to achieve on the battlefield.

NOW DON'T get me wrong. I am all in favor of the use of force against Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Just last week, I wrote about the need to reassert complete military control over Gaza, put Hamas leaders on trial for war crimes and rebuild and repopulate the ruins of Gush Katif.

But it is hard to escape the nagging feeling that what is really motivating our politicians right now is not bullets, but ballots. With elections looming in just six weeks, and polls indicating that Labor and Kadima are headed for the opposition benches, both parties have suddenly rediscovered the need to defend the country and its citizens.

Bear in mind that Livni has been foreign minister since May 2006, and Barak has served as defense minister since June 2007. During that period, literally thousands of rockets, mortar shells and other projectiles have been fired at the South, and yet the government refrained from taking concerted action to stop it. Indeed, since January 1, Palestinian terrorists in Gaza have fired more than 3,000 Kassam rockets and mortar rounds at communities in the Negev.

And yet, the military campaign only began on December 27. So the question remains: What took so long? Sure, the so-called cease-fire with Hamas was in effect until December 19. But that was a cease-fire in name only, one which the terrorists brashly and repeatedly violated.

On June 12, for example, Hamas fired a barrage of more than 50 mortar shells, Kassam and Katyusha rockets at the South. Similarly, on November 14, it bombarded towns in the Negev. Yet in neither instance did Israel undertake a large-scale military operation.

So it seems somewhat odd that precisely 45 days before the elections, with their fortunes sagging at the polls, Barak and Livni suddenly seem compelled to act to stop the rocket fire.

And not surprisingly, it is already paying political dividends, at least for Barak's Labor Party. On Sunday, Channel 10 reported the results of a poll which was conducted after the air strikes on Gaza the previous day. It showed Labor soaring to 16 seats from a projected 10 in earlier surveys. That is a gain of 60 percent in just a matter of days.

YOU MIGHT be wondering why any of this matters, as long as the IDF is getting the job done in Gaza. But that is precisely the point. If in fact this current operation is guided by political calculations, rather than straightforward military and security considerations, you can rest assured that it will end as soon as the political objective is achieved, with strategic concerns coming in a distant second.

And so, rather than achieving all-out victory, which is what is so desperately needed, we might very well find ourselves in a situation where Hamas is battered, but left standing, or perhaps replaced with a corrupt and hostile Fatah-run regime. In either scenario, it will only be a matter of time before the rocket fire returns, just as it has in the past.

So while there is of course reason to rejoice that we are at last defending ourselves, we should not delude ourselves into thinking that our leadership has gotten it right this time. Chances are that even as they pull the trigger, they are keeping a steady eye on the polls.

So now more than ever, we need to raise our voices and make clear to the politicians that nothing short of total victory in Gaza will do. It is time to reverse the disaster of the August 2005 pullout, and restore control over the area. Anything less will only mean continued turmoil and terror.

Israel did not start this conflict, nor did we seek it out. But we know how to end it, so let's make sure that, once and for all, that is what we do.

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