

Netanyahu vs. Lieberman on Gaza

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Last November, Avigdor Lieberman resigned as Israel's Defense Minister. At the time, he accused Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who after two days of fighting had agreed to a cease-fire in Gaza, of not responding forcefully enough to Hamas. Netanyahu wanted to inflict enough pain to force Hamas to agree to a cease-fire, but did not want to be drawn into a larger conflict with Hamas if it could be avoided. For a prolonged conflict might leave Hamas so weakened that it could lose control in Gaza. The result could be chaos in the territory; this could require Israel to take over and assume the responsibilities of rule in Gaza, something Netanyahu wishes to avoid at all costs.

For Netanyahu, Israel's most dangerous enemies are in the north: Iran threatens Israel both directly, from its own territory and from its bases in Syria, and indirectly, through

Hezbollah, which in Lebanon has 140,000 rockets and missiles that can hit anywhere in Israel. Hamas is an annoyance, but its latest barrage of rockets have caused no Israeli deaths and only seven wounded. Though Israel in response hit 30 important Hamas targets, Netanyahu stopped there; he did not want to divert his military's attention away from the main threat in the north.

There have been some changes since last November. Israel's bombing campaign has limited Iran's ability to establish bases in Syria. Israel has also located and destroyed at least six very large tunnels that Hezbollah had built from Lebanon into Israel that, if undetected, would have allowed a surprise attack by its fighters on the Galilee. Furthermore, the reimposition of American sanctions has worked: Iran is suffering economically and has had to reduce its financial support for Hezbollah, including cuts in Hezbollah salaries, and possibly – it's unclear – in the numbers of new weapons it attempts to ship to Hezbollah. But Hezbollah still has those 140,000 rockets in southern Lebanon aimed at Israel.

Meanwhile, the dilemma for Netanyahu remains. If he sends troops in to topple Hamas, then what? Israel is then stuck with having to administer a hostile population in Gaza, and the outside world will unfairly blame it for Gaza's economic mess. So far he's done well, with punishing attacks on Hamas, always from the air, and no ground invasion. He has kept Hamas weak enough so that it has been suing for a ceasefire, but not so weak that it loses control of Gaza. Whether Hamas can prevent Islamic Jihad, a group in Gaza that is even more fanatical than Hamas, from shooting rockets into Israel so as to make sure that no ceasefire holds, remains to be seen.

If the ceasefire with Israel does hold, people in Gaza will again turn their attention to the parlous state of the economy, and renew the protests against Hamas that they began in March, but temporarily halted during the exchange of blows between Hamas and Israel. The price of goods in Gaza keeps

rising, taxes have been increased, unemployment is above 50% (and for younger workers has hit 70%), and wages have been cut for those who do work. Hamas has mismanaged the economy, not least by allocating large sums to military uses, including the production of thousands of domestically-produced rockets and the digging of tunnels that cost between \$1 and \$3 million each. Finally there is massive corruption – theft – by its leaders. Khaled Meshaal, the leader of Hamas between 2004 and 2017, now lives in Doha, enjoying a fortune that Arab sources estimate at between \$2.6 and \$5 billion, money that he diverted from aid that was meant for the people of Gaza. Mousa Abu Marzouk, former Deputy Chief of the political wing of Hamas, has also accumulated, by the same diversion of aid funds, several billion dollars, which he enjoys from his luxury home in New Cairo, Egypt. The current head of Hamas, Ismail Haniyeh, has not stolen nearly as much; he is believed to have about \$10 million in real estate and bank accounts. But give him time. Arab sources claim there are another 1,200 high-ranking members of Hamas living in Gaza who are millionaires.

After Hamas fired 470 rockets and mortar shells into southern Israel on November 12 and 13, Israel struck 160 Hamas targets all over Gaza. Hamas then agreed, after that furious response, to a cease-fire. But less than 24 hours after that ceasefire was announced, however, Lieberman resigned from the government. Lieberman believed that Israel should have kept up its wide-ranging attacks on Hamas positions, and called the ceasefire agreed to by Netanyahu a “capitulation to terror.” There is no doubt that Netanyahu’s decision has been unpopular in Israel, where many people, especially in the south, wanted the IDF to crush Hamas, in order to buy a long period of quiet, as happened after the Gaza War of 2014. No one has any illusions that such an agreement could ever become a permanent peace treaty. Every agreement with Hamas is at best a “hudna,” or truce treaty. Hamas in Gaza will use that ceasefire to rebuild, as best it can, its stock of weapons, and to dig more

tunnels to smuggle both weaponry and construction materials (to build more tunnels) into Gaza, and terrorists into Israel. For the Jihad against Israel has no end; there is no “solution” to it. Peace can only be maintained through deterrence, as it was with the Soviet Union during the Cold War. For such deterrence to work, Israel must be, and be perceived to be, overwhelmingly more powerful than its enemies. In accepting the ceasefire, Hamas has signaled it now understands it has much more to lose through an exchange of blows with a more powerful Israel. That is why, as Netanyahu reported, Hamas “begged” for the ceasefire.

Why was Netanyahu, always regarded as a hawk, well-pleased with and defending this ceasefire agreement? It had less to do with the threat from Hamas itself, and more to do with ensuring that the IDF could concentrate its attention, and if necessary, its intermittent application of force, on its northern border with Lebanon and Syria. For the Iranians now are present in Syria, undeterred by Israeli attacks on their bases, and now preparing to build new bases sufficiently camouflaged – some with missiles that to avoid Israeli detection can be hidden in underground tunnels, and then raised up hydraulically to be fired. In the meantime, the Iranians are sharing bases with both Hezbollah and Assad’s military, making it harder to identify and attack any of the three – Syrians, Iranians, Hezbollah – in isolation.

Netanyahu has decided it is more important for now to put Hamas on the back burner while concentrating on the threat in the north from Hezbollah. Because of the [military and financial support it receives from Iran](#), the Lebanese terror group now poses a threat to Israel unlike anything the country has seen in recent history. It has advanced weaponry far beyond anything it had in the 2006 war, weaponry which is constantly being updated with supplies of the very latest in weapons technology.

[A report](#) from the Jewish Institute for National Security of

America's (JINSA) Hybrid Warfare Task force, which is headed by several retired senior U.S. military officials, outlined this striking strategic threat that Israel will face in its next war with Hezbollah.

According to the report, the next conflict with Hezbollah will "bear little resemblance to anything that has come before between Israel and its adversaries."

"Changes in the strategic environment in the 12 years since the last Israeli-Hezbollah conflict will translate into unparalleled death and destruction," the report said, noting that Hezbollah's recent fighting experience in Syria, its support from Iran and its massive weapons arsenal pose a "quantum leap" in the terror group's ability to inflict devastation on Israel.

"Today, Hezbollah possesses more firepower than 95 percent of the world's conventional militaries, and more rockets and missiles than all European NATO members combined," the report stated.

Various estimates put Hezbollah's overall rocket and missile stockpiles at between 120,000 to 140,000—up from roughly 10,000 in the last conflict in 2006.

The threat posed by Hezbollah is much greater than that from Hamas. In mid-November, Hamas did its level best, firing nearly 500 rockets and mortars into Israel, but only one Israeli was killed. One can imagine the destruction and casualties that would result from any attack by Hezbollah, with its gigantic stockpile – 120,000 to 140,000 – of rockets and missiles, many of them advanced, and hidden all over Lebanon.

Netanyahu has decided that the IDF has to focus most of its military efforts on preparing to meet any threat on the northern front, by Hezbollah in Lebanon, and by both Hezbollah

and Iranian forces in Syria. He does not want to get bogged down in Gaza, or even have to divert limited military resources to the south (such as the Iron Dome anti-missile shield). A cease-fire with Hamas is always temporary, he knows, but these intermittent flare-ups with Hamas are manageable in a way that a massive attack from Iran, aided by Hezbollah's missiles, would not be. Israelis call the damage they inflict repeatedly on Hamas as "mowing the grass." But the threat from Hamas hardly compares with that from Iran-backed Hezbollah or Iran itself.

According to the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1701, which ended the Israel-Hezbollah war in 2006, all armed groups in Lebanon were supposed to disarm. Instead of abiding by the Resolution, Hezbollah then began its gigantic arms buildup, with Iranian help, while Israel waited – in vain – for members of the U.N. to force Hezbollah to honor its solemn commitment to disarm. Everyone – Europe, America, U.N. peacekeepers – looked the other way; Israel complained, repeatedly, without success.

Nothing was done. The U.N. demonstrated its impotence, its inability and unwillingness, to force Hezbollah to abide by Resolution 1701. And the arms buildup by the terrorist group continued, unstopped and unstoppable, even until today. The only attempt to enforce Resolution 1701 has been by Israel, which has bombed Iranian shipments of weapons meant for Hezbollah. But it's all a bit late. Hezbollah now possesses more firepower, according to the JINSA report, than 95 percent of the world's conventional militaries, and more rockets and missiles than all European NATO members combined.

Netanyahu wants to free the IDF from having to devote so many resources to Israel's Southern Front. He knows that ever since 2006, Israel has turned its main military attention to Gaza, and had several small wars with Hamas, in 2006, 2008-2009, 2014, and 2018, along with many smaller-scale exchanges of fire. These conflicts have all been manageable, with Israel's

victory never in question, but they also helped deflect much of Israel's attention away from Hezbollah's steady, massive buildup, with the results we now see.

In an Israeli attack in mid-November, by way of an answer to a barrage of rockets and missiles from Hamas, the terrorist group saw the destruction of many of its weapons depots, of Al-Aqsa TV, the Hamas-run television station that broadcasts anti-Israel propaganda and also sends messages to would-be terrorists, of several of Hamas' main office buildings, and a few residential structures, too, where weapons were known to be stored. In every attack Israel followed its "knock on the roof" practice – that is, dropping non-explosive or low-yield devices on the roofs of targeted buildings, as a warning of imminent bombing attacks, in order to give the inhabitants time to flee. The results for Israel have been most satisfactory: they hit more than 160 targets successfully, and kept the loss of life among the "Palestinians" to an astounding minimum of seven dead.

Hamas, which not very long ago seemed swaggeringly intent on enlarging the armed conflict with Israel, was quickly chastened by seeing the widespread damage Israel managed to inflict in such a short time. That damage led Hamas to not only accept but– which is never a given with Muslim Arabs – to observe the terms of the cease-fire.

Did Israel make a strategic mistake in accepting the cease-fire? Ought it to have continued to pound Hamas so hard that it lost control of Gaza altogether? Wouldn't a lawless Gaza be a grave danger to Israel, a place where some even more dangerous group, notably ISIS or Islamic Jihad, might fill the vacuum left by the crushing of Hamas? Worst of all for Israel would be if Gaza descended into complete anarchy, forcing Israel to move large numbers of troops into Gaza in order to impose order and to take over such mundane tasks as supplying electricity, water, sanitation services, for a dangerous and hate-filled population of 1.8 million "Palestinians." Indeed,

the very worst thing that Hamas could now do to harm Israel is not to lobby more ineffectual rockets into southern Israel, but to announce that it cannot properly rule in Gaza when it is "under attack" by Israel, and then to hand the task of ruling Gaza over to the Israelis.

Netanyahu doesn't want Israel to become preoccupied with its Southern Front. A cease-fire, that was first called for by Hamas, will satisfy him now, on the assumption that it will last a few years, as did a similar ceasefire in 2014. Meanwhile, he can, with less distraction, turn his nearly full attention to the arms buildup by Hezbollah, supported by Iran, in the north. For the rulers in Tehran have done everything they can to let the world – and Israel – know that a war by Iran and Hezbollah on the Jewish state is not a question of "if" but of "when."

Lieberman's resignation in November made the Prime Minister appear to some, quite erroneously, as insufficiently tough on Hamas. He let loose the IAF in March with results sufficient to change Hamas's tune overnight, and brought about its willingness to both conclude, and honor, a ceasefire. In that month, there was massive bombing after a rocket hit the Israeli village of Meshmeret. Among 30 high-value targets that the Israelis hit were the military intelligence headquarters of Hamas, the offices of Hamas head Ismael Haniyeh, and a major weapons storehouse. That was enough to get Hamas to sue for a ceasefire, to which Netanyahu agreed, in order to ensure that the attention of his military is focused further north, and especially to the problem of Iranian bases in Syria.

Though the Great March of Return continues in Gaza, its rioters receive ever-diminishing attention from the outside world, including fellow Arabs, which is not what Hamas expected. And the latest ceasefire with Hamas, that received quite a pummeling from the IAF, seems to be (mostly) holding. So Israel can return almost its full attention to bombing Iranian bases in Syria, and any weapons being shipped from

those bases to Hezbollah in Lebanon. Israel still has to figure out a way to deal with those 120,000-140,000 rockets and missiles Hezbollah already has in Lebanon. Political considerations rule out a first-strike direct attack on Hezbollah's missiles. But Israel could maneuver Hezbollah into launching an attack that would then justify a massive Israeli response. Israel could create an incident, possibly the assassination of a Hezbollah leader, so that Hezbollah feels compelled to respond, ideally with some sort of rocket barrage, thus giving Israel the excuse it needs to massively respond in turn, destroying as many weapons warehoused by Hezbollah in Lebanon as it can, before those rockets and missiles can be rained down on the Galilee.

Avigdor Lieberman has a fiery temperament; he's famous for his outbursts. Netanyahu is sober and calculating. He's weighed the risks to Israel of these violent exchanges with Hamas, which require the IAF and IDF focusing on the Southern Front, while Hezbollah in the north continues to enlarge its supplies of rockets and missiles. He's concluded that the latest ceasefire in Gaza will hold for at least 5-6 months, as the previous one, concluded last November, did. After all, what keeps the peace with Hamas is the threat of attacks by the IAF. He simply wants the Israeli military to hold Hamas to its cease-fire, not destroy the group, and meanwhile, to focus on countering the threat from Iran and Hezbollah, a problem that cannot wait.

In a few years a lot can happen. The regime of the Islamic Republic is now internally weaker than it has ever been, because of the discontent over Iran's economic situation. Iran has been suffering from the renewed imposition of sanctions, triggered by the American pullout from the nuclear deal. It finds itself unable to sell one million barrels of oil of the 2.5 million total it had been selling before the sanctions were reimposed. More bad news: Iran's foreign debt increased by 40% from 2017 to 2018. The Iranian riyal continues what

Forbes magazine calls its "death spiral." And to top it all off, Iran is now suffering its worst drought in at least 50 years; both agriculture and the raising of livestock have been hard hit.

This economic collapse has led Iranian crowds to shout "Death to Palestine" instead of "Death to Israel," and "No to Syria, Yes to Iran." In both cases, they were expressing opposition to Iran's expensive foreign adventurism. Were these discontented to come to power, that would affect Hezbollah, which could no longer count on Iranian support. Deprived of such backing, Hezbollah might be more willing to deal with Israel, possibly surrendering part, or most, of its arsenal in exchange for Israeli promises not to attack it, but to leave the group alone, allowing it to at least maintain Shi'a dominance in both Lebanon and Syria.

Should nothing change in Iran, and Hezbollah remain the serious threat it is today, at least the IDF will now be able to devote much greater attention, and resources, to that northern threat, limiting its activity in Gaza to enforcing the ceasefire. Netanyahu could have adopted Lieberman's line and bombed Hamas into complete submission. But if Hamas in Gaza were truly destroyed, it is Israel that would have to take control of that wretched place, to prevent anarchy and to keep the most dangerous group of all, ISIS, from assuming power. That's a nightmarish task Israel wants to avoid. A weakened Hamas, too weak to fight Israel, but just strong enough to maintain its control of Gaza, would be the best possible outcome from Israel's point of view. That was Netanyahu's calculation back in November 2018, and it remains his calculation today.

Here's a question or two for Avigdor Lieberman to consider. What must Hassan Nasrallah, the head of Hezbollah, or Ayatollah Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of Iran, now be thinking? Like you, but for very different reasons, they opposed the Israel-Hamas ceasefire. Can you think of any

reason why Netanyahu's agreeing to this ceasefire with Hamas – while firmly turning Israel's attention back to the Northern Front, which is now the most important theatre in the Jewish state's permanent war for survival – makes sense?

Pierre Mendes-France, the former Prime Minister of France who wisely pulled all French forces out of Vietnam in 1954, famously said that “to govern is to choose.” In Gaza, Netanyahu has chosen, wisely.

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