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Opinion | The Only Solution to the Gaza War: Mass Protests by Israelis and International Pressure

Lev Grinberg Feb 6, 2024 11:56 pm IST   🔔 **Follow**

Yagil Levy, the most salient expert on civilian-military relations in Israel, has been bravely raising since October 7 the most troubling questions regarding the war.

In his January 30 Haaretz op-ed, he raised the most troubling question of all: Could the war have been prevented?

This is the political question that was asked following the Yom Kippur War, alongside the military-judgment question: Why weren't the reservists mobilized? The more difficult political question after that war was: Why was the peace initiative of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, offering peace for the return of the entire Sinai Peninsula, rejected?

This time, too, an issue of military judgment arises: Why did the army ignore the clear signs of Hamas' preparations for an attack? But the most troubling question is the political one: Why did Benjamin Netanyahu ignore for 10 years the intelligence that Hamas was planning a ground attack on the neighboring Jewish settlements, including the kidnapping of civilians and soldiers?

The failure this time is greater and several times more disastrous than that of October 1973. The misconception of the political and military elites that fell in the Yom Kippur

War was that control over the enemy's territories provides security.

This time there was a deadly combination of Netanyahu's political strategy, according to which "Hamas is good for us," and the military concept of deterrence. The policy of deterrence was designed by the army following its failure in the second intifada, meaning that if it is impossible to win, we will deter them overwhelmingly.

This is the historical significance of the unilateral withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and the imposition of the blockade on it (falsely characterized as "disengagement"). Following the military failure to suppress terrorism, we supposedly got out of there, and since then we have the legitimacy to "deter them" more and more.

Hamas won the 2006 elections thanks to the unilateral withdrawal, on the grounds that it was the armed struggle that got the IDF out of Gaza, and not Mahmoud Abbas' diplomacy. But only after the big round of 2014 ("Operation Protective Edge") did Hamas come to the conclusion that in the aerial clashes, the IDF is on top, and it must plan a ground campaign.

To Israel, however, this meant that "deterrence" was working; after all, they were afraid of the IDF's destructive bombings and assassinations, so they moved to planning a ground campaign.

Since then, Israel's political and military elites allowed Hamas to organize, arm themselves and dig tunnels until the October 7 attack. The synergy between Netanyahu's strategy that "Hamas is good for us" (namely for his rule)

and the army's "deterrence" strategy is what brought Israel to the October 7 massacre and disastrous retaliation.

Yet negotiated solutions could have prevented them. Thus, it's not surprising that Benny Gantz and Gadi Eisenkot sit in the war cabinet; they have been Netanyahu's partners since 2014, as IDF chiefs of staff, in the State of Israel's unprecedented failure to prevent such a disaster.

Moreover, the entire cabinet, including Gantz and Eisenkot, are responsible for the key decision that not only brought heavy losses and left the army "sinking in the mud," Lebanon-style, but also brought Israel to the International Court of Justice in The Hague: the decision to launch the ground invasion of Gaza.

If, after October 7, it was possible to justify aerial bombardment as an appropriate response, both as punishment and in response to the rocket fire on the south and center, the ground invasion – pushing the residents of northern Gaza to the south and destruction of infrastructure, government institutions, universities and hospitals – transformed Israel from being victim of a brutal massacre to the victimizer of Palestinians and bringer of mass death, destruction and humanitarian disaster.

The international identification with Israel and with the plight of its slaughtered and kidnapped citizens was slowly replaced by identification with the suffering of the Palestinians, and in many places also with support for Hamas. Israel's self-destruction led it to The Hague on the charge of genocide – all this after Hamas committed horrific war crimes and crimes against humanity.

The self-destruction of Israel is the result of the harmful synergy between the responsibility of the political and military elites. These two elites have failed, and they are not able to rescue Israel from the mud they dragged her into.

Following this submersion, the question of not only the Yom Kippur War but also the Lebanon War arises: Was there a choice, could it have been prevented? Was the ground invasion a "war of choice"?

The answer is yes. But unlike in Lebanon, the responsibility now lies not only with Netanyahu and the heads of the security establishment, but also with the media and the opposition, who updated the settlers' 2000 slogan, "Let the IDF win," to the national slogan, "Together we will win," and pushed the army to victory in a war that was a foregone failure. And there is no telling how and when it will end. Israeli society is captive to the concept of military victory, and of deterrence.

It's worth learning from the discourse on the first war of choice in Lebanon, which was the first war between the IDF and the Palestinians. The main criticism of it argued that it was a "war of choice," which served the political goals of Menachem Begin and the heads of the security establishment, Ariel Sharon and Rafael Eitan, to perpetuate control over the Palestinians in the territories.

Begin's answer was sophisticated; he claimed that it is better to wage a "war of choice," because then Israel, by taking the initiative, suffers fewer casualties. Thus, in the Six Day War and the 1956 Operation Kadesh, there were few casualties relative to the military achievements. All this came in comparison to the "wars with no choice," the War of

Independence and Yom Kippur War, in which Israel suffered many times more casualties.

Begin was of course right about the past, but he was wrong (or maybe he intended to mislead the public) about the Lebanon War in 1982, which was not fought against an enemy state, but against Palestinian guerrilla organizations in a country with which Israel had no conflict.

It took the army and the political leadership six more years before they came to the conclusion that there is no military solution to the Palestinian struggle, and that a political solution was needed. The IDF chief of staff during the first intifada and the defense minister created the beneficial synergy between the military and political elites that led to the recognition of the necessity to find a Palestinian partner to manage the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and also to fight the terrorism of Hamas.

Although the concept was still military, involving a partnership between the security forces, it also included political negotiations that could have led to a political agreement. But they were quickly interrupted by the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin and the rise to power of the opponents of the Oslo Accords, Netanyahu and religious Zionists, which also followed the February–March 1996 terror attacks.

Getting Israel out of Gaza, rescuing the kidnapped from captivity and bringing back the soldiers sinking there in the mud are not top priority now, not as long as the political and military leadership continue to advocate victory and reject political solutions.

To overcome the deteriorating crisis, Israel must recognize the achievements of Hamas on October 7: surprising the IDF, kidnapping hundreds of Israelis and putting the Palestinian question back on the international agenda. Like in a judo fight, the only way to overcome an opponent coming at you is to turn his power against him and put him down.

This is what should have been done since October 7, but was not – because of the destructive synergy between the military and political elites, who immediately started blaming each other for the failure.

Instead of exploiting Hamas' vulnerability – its war crimes and crimes against humanity on October 7 – Israel dragged it into a war inside the Gaza Strip. But what still can be used as instruments to reverse this disastrous response is Hamas' moral obligation to release the hostages, and the international mediation that's striving to stop the fighting.

This can lead to the opening of a political process, which can lead to a political settlement of Palestinian independence alongside the State of Israel.

The question is: Who will be able to do this, in the absence of political leadership? Only mass protests in the streets and international pressure might wake up the political system from its deep slumber and help the military announce, as it did in 1988, that there is no military solution to the Palestinian question, only a political solution.

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