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40 days after war, Hamas rule of Gaza gaining legitimacy

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Three rockets fell Thursday in the area around the Gaza Strip, one in the yard of a Sderot home - just a few reminders that Israel is still far from its declared goal in Operation Cast Lead. Discussion about the military operation's outcome revolves around the term "deterrence."

If Israel can enshrine Cast Lead in a long-term agreement, the war will be remembered as a success. But fears are mounting that the operation's military achievements are dissipating. If so, the operation will go down in history as a less-than-successful round in a long war in the Gaza Strip.

The Israel Defense Forces left Gaza with the feeling that it had proven itself, after its debacle in Lebanon in 2006. But it seems that the bottom line will have to wait. In Lebanon, too, it took several months before it could be concluded that although the IDF made mistakes, enough deterrence against Hezbollah was achieved to prevent renewed fighting.

Barak, who was quick to criticize what went wrong in Lebanon, followed Olmert and Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni's lead in withdrawing from Gaza without a real agreement. But like in Lebanon, faced with only an aerial attack or one followed by a ground operation, Israel chose the middle ground and acted slowly and partially. Because in Gaza the enemy was less determined than in Lebanon, the move first appeared to be a victory. Only when the IDF left could the results of the war be seen as limited, with almost daily attacks near the fence, a continuing "drizzle" of rockets and information on renewed arms smuggling.

The blow Hamas was dealt has only led to increased admiration for the group, according to opinion polls in the territories. Hamas is still waiting for another crowning achievement: if abducted IDF soldier Gilad Shalit is released for more than 1,000 Palestinian prisoners.

However, the army is currently reviewing its performance during the war and an encouraging picture is emerging in terms of its professionalism, control over units, aerial assistance to ground forces, quality of intelligence and logistics compared to the Second Lebanon War.

Diplomatic lessons

Outgoing Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's government made three major moves during its term: the Second Lebanon War, the bombing of the Syrian nuclear facility and Operation Cast Lead. The same lesson can be learned from all: The international community will back Israel's military operations as long as they are short, focused, conducted from the air and do not result in major civilian casualties.

Cast Lead raised international hackles, because Israel lost few people to the rockets fired from Gaza, but its response caused widespread death and destruction. What's more, in Gaza the victims were Palestinians, who already bear the brunt of the tragedy of 1948; the world is much more sympathetic to them than to Syria's Bashar Assad or Hezbollah's Hassan Nasrallah.

The major damage Cast Lead did was in legitimizing Hamas as the ruler of the Gaza Strip, with increasing calls for "reconciliation talks" that will return the organization to the Palestinian leadership.

The operation was planned to coincide with the end of the term of the Israel-friendly President George W. Bush, before President Barack Obama entered office. But now, instead of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton coming to talk to Israel about the Iranian threat, her first visit in office will focus on the problems of the Palestinians in Gaza. That might be the greatest damage of all.

Reservists' two cents

Forty days after the end of the war in Gaza, reserve paratroop sergeant, Keren Hagigi, whose unit fought north of Gaza City, said that when the cabinet announced the end of the operation, "of course I was glad to get home to my wife and little boy, but I couldn't stop thinking about the fact that even when we were sitting in a house in Beit Lahiya, we could still see Katyushas being launched, right next to us."

But Sgt. 1st Class Amitai Ahiman added: "I think that except for getting [kidnapped soldier] Gilad Shalit back, we did the most we could. From what I saw inside [the Strip], we did attain deterrence."

Another reservist, Amir Marmor, a gunner, said he left the war ashamed. "The IDF used disproportionate power, in a kind of punishment operation."

Same old in Sderot

The Color Red alert was followed Thursday by the muffled sound of a falling rocket, seemingly not too close to the center of town. Only later, people found out a rocket had hit a house and a few people were suffering from shock. In Sderot, it's business as usual.

To their credit, people in Sderot are amazingly tolerant of their sometimes diametrically opposed positions about the war, a tolerance that allowed the city to continue functioning during the war, despite the exhaustion, the bedwetting children and the anxiety attacks.

After two weeks in front of the cameras, Sderot is back on the margins it knows so well: failing businesses, a desperate school system. But who has the strength to talk about it?

Healthcare struggles

Out of 500 injured people during Operation Cast Lead - soldiers and civilians - and 548 victims of shock and trauma, 18 soldiers are still hospitalized at Sheba Medical Center, Tel Hashomer. Barzilai Hospital in Ashkelon is still struggling to build its rocket-proof

emergency room.

Psychological trauma is still visible. Dr. Ronny Berger, head of the Natal community services for trauma victims, says, "these are people who have lost their sense of security, and because rockets are still 'drizzling,' it's hard to persuade them that it's all over." Natal is still responding to the serious psychological needs of people, who contact the organization through its hot line or whom its staff locates during home visits, a model Berger says Natal developed and finds very effective, since some people are afraid to leave their homes to get treated.

Cities take stock

After many sleepless nights, 40 days later, mayors are taking stock of how their cities functioned during the war, and most importantly, they say, how to get ready for the next round. Be'er Sheva Mayor Rubik Danilovich ordered all his department heads to submit reports on problems and lessons learned. "I asked the Defense Ministry to install shelters as quickly as possible throughout the city," he said. The head of the Eshkol Regional Council, Haim Yellin, said his area has still not returned to normal, even after all the repairs, "physical and organizational" have been made. Sha'ar Hanegev Regional Council head Alon Shuster says, "security directives have changed; everything has changed; except for one thing - they're still firing at us."

Damage to farms

Cultivated fields were dealt a mortal blow by Operation Cast Lead, after the army prohibited farmers from spraying, irrigating and harvesting. Forty days on, the government has still not paid farmers compensation. Out of 140,000 dunams (35,000 acres), 3,000 were hit. "Another problem is that the army took over land and damaged it," Lior Katari, coordinator of the Agricultural Council of the Eshkol region, says, adding that he estimates the damage to farmers at NIS 150 million.

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