

Belligerence Will Only Make it Worse

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The sea and air attacks on Gaza, the crisis in relations with Egypt and the fear of an escalation of the military confrontation, should not eclipse an important process which is likely to have a great influence on future political moves. The continuing Al Aqsa Intifada has slowly worn down the argument that "there is no partner for peace," the slogan with which Prime Minister Ehud Barak conducted public discourse in Israel in October. Barak himself, in his readiness to take advantage during the past week of any option for direct and indirect talks with the Palestinian leadership, is signaling that there is someone to talk to there, even now. More and more commentators and academics are expressing doubt about the claim that the deterioration in the situation stems from the surprising Palestinian rejection of Barak's generous offer. The possibility that this time it is Israel which is refusing to make peace, and that the offer formulated by Barak at Camp David is unacceptable to the Palestinians, is being seriously considered in many circles. This view was strengthened indirectly in a reprimand sent by the late Leah Rabin to Barak before her death, and was also expressed in Clinton's demand that Barak send him some sign of Israeli willingness for political change, as a precondition for renewing the negotiations.

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The weakening of Barak's version of the truth provides relief, of course, for Israel's parties on the center and the left, which were the main political victims of Barak's media spin in October. The more Israelis became convinced that the Palestinians who were friends of the left are not, and maybe never were, peace partners, the more they tended to blame these leftist parties for shortsightedness and a loss of direction. Now, when Barak's version of the facts is showing cracks, there is a gradual drop in the confusion which last month engulfed the more moderate parties in Israel.

Of course, Barak's willingness to raise the ante of military action in the territories encourages some people on the right. But even among the settlers, the satisfaction they derive from the policy of "an

eye for an eye" will not last long. There is a possibility that military decisiveness will bring about confusion in the ranks of the right. This is because of a paradox which is very familiar from previous wars between occupying armies and civilian uprisings, in which for the occupier, almost every military success is immediately translated into a political failure. Barak and the upper echelons of the IDF understood this equation well, and until recently, translated it into a policy of relative restraint. There are signs that various parts of the Israeli public have internalized its significance as well.

This paradox will allow no rest for the Likud and the powers to its right, including the settlers. The Pavlovian reflex causes them to shout that if force isn't working, it means that much more force is necessary. The uncontrollable personal need of politicians on the right to recycle the clichés about determination and pride in order to remind their voters that they still exist, is also contributing to the belligerence. On the other hand, when the childish enthusiasm that "we gave it to them" dies down, even the Likud will understand that in the present situation, more strength is less strength. The protests of Likud MKs Limor Livnat, Danny Naveh and Silvan Shalom, and former prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu's hints that Israel has all the military means necessary for achieving a victory if it only had more determined leadership - will not stand the test of reality. Because reality is reality. Barak, who as chief of staff opposed the Oslo accords, refuses to allow the Palestinians to found a state which will be independent, territorially viable, permanent, and free of signs of Israeli occupation, in the entire area of the West Bank and Gaza. The Palestinian nation is uniting against him in desperate determination, preparing for a long and bloody struggle for liberation, in the classic anti-colonial tradition. In the middle stand the settlers, trying with all their might to confuse Israel's mainstream society with the false and dangerous slogan that the territories are Israel, and vice versa.

These are the outlines of the useless tragedy in which all of us, Israelis as well as Palestinians, are participating as actors, against our will for the most part. A real political step will take place here only if and when there is a maturation of the process which began during Rabin's term, but receded during the days of Netanyahu and Barak - mental, followed by physical, separation from the curse of the territories and the madness of the settlements. It can't happen

immediately, and it is hard to tell what is going to happen in the months, and possibly years, which will pass meanwhile. There are already 215 Palestinian families and 29 Israeli families who have lost their loved ones, and thousands of families, mostly on the Palestinian side, will be tending to their wounded and crippled for many years.

It should be remembered that this is happening at the end of a period during which both sides generally respected the red lines in spite of everything, and managed to avoid localized incidents leading to many deaths. If this trend is preserved, we will perhaps succeed in getting through the unnecessary tragedy awaiting us, until the reduction of the level of bloodshed. If, on the other hand, those who are armed are tempted into accepting the confused propaganda of violence advocated by the belligerent right in Israel, and the cries for Jihad (holy war) on the Palestinian side, the rivulet is likely to swell into rivers of blood, which will delay the end of the conflict indefinitely