

Israel Warns Hamas: Don't Test Us



A Hamas military drill in the Gaza Strip in March 2018. Photo: Reuters/Ibraheem Abu Mustafa.

JNS.org - The High Holidays, a time when nothing much gets done in Israel, are over, and as we return to our turbulent day-to-day lives on the front lines, the mentality is one of battle.

Primarily, this means that cross-border terrorist activity has resumed. After two months of relative quiet, last Friday some 20,000 Gazans approached the fence to clash with Israel Defense Forces. It ended with seven casualties and 500 wounded on the Palestinian side, and none among the Israeli forces, but make no mistake, it could have been much worse. Only our forces' correct operating tactics prevented the incident from ending otherwise.

Today is Friday, and we'll probably see more of the same. To that end, additional personnel were deployed to the border on Thursday to help prevent a situation in which a small contingent finds itself in trouble, which could lead to a hefty injury count among Palestinians or wounded among the IDF soldiers — not to mention the threat of a soldier being kidnapped. The IDF announcement about additional forces being sent to the border carried a clear message of deterrence. It told Hamas, "Pay attention: The holidays are over, and we will not allow things to slide toward a situation of terrorism from Gaza against Israeli communities on the other side."

It's doubtful that Hamas wants that to happen, but its back is against the wall. The socioeconomic situation in the Gaza Strip is consistently deteriorating and the leadership there has no solution. The indirect cease-fire talks in Cairo are stalled because of Palestinian Authority leader Mahmoud Abbas, and all efforts to find a way around him have failed. Abbas was the one who vetoed a plan to ship more fuel to Gaza (with Israel's approval and funding from Qatar), thus increasing the number of hours of electricity for residents. The Fatah leader is trying to bring Hamas to its knees.

Hamas is taking out its anger on Israel, hoping that the mess at the border will

lead to a solution. In Gaza and Jerusalem, everyone understands that Hamas is playing with fire, and that while neither side is interested in an armed conflict that would, at best, end the same way it began except for the destruction and the body count, things could easily get out of control and start snowballing rapidly.

One scenario that could set that particular ball in motion is if any Israeli civilians were wounded. The return of terrorism from Gaza includes renewed arson attacks using burning balloons and kites floated over the fence, as well as a devilish new invention — explosives-laden toys thrown over the fence. It would only take one Israeli child harmed by one of these innocent-looking improvised bombs to change Israel's policy at the border.

As the IDF focuses on the upswing in violence along the southern front, the battle against outgoing IDF Ombudsman Maj. Gen. Yitzhak Brik continues. Brik's letter, which appeared in print for the first time in the pages of Israel Hayom this week, drove the IDF crazy, not only because it repeated old claims without any new information, but also because it tainted the credibility of the IDF and its commanders. Most of the anger was over Brik's claim that the army is in worse shape today than it was prior to the 1973 Yom Kippur War (a harsh and baseless claim) and his statement that he was taking action out of professional concern and not because of any personal agenda. If that is the case, the IDF is asking, why did Brik send his letter to everyone except IDF Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Gadi Eizenkot, who first learned about it from the media?

In the meantime, State Comptroller Yosef Shapira has waded into the mess. In a brief statement issued on Thursday, Shapira said that the IDF was open to criticism, was cooperating, and making the necessary changes. This is an important statement from the nation's main body of oversight, which regularly looks into the level of readiness of the IDF's various units. Although the comptroller made it clear that he had instructed the IDF to send him its report on the probe it is currently carrying out in response to Brik's claims and based on what it says will make decisions — the statement itself, at this particular time, is an expression of faith in the army and its leaders.

The person who hasn't taken a clear stance on the spat are those in the government who oversee the army (and Brik).

Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman summoned Eizenkot and Brik for a

discussion a few weeks ago, and in a few forums has stated that the army is in a better state of readiness than it has been for years. But the current tone of the debate demands a more unequivocal declaration, whatever it might be. It's important for the public's faith in the army and for the faith of the army itself, especially now, after the holiday, when the situation in the south (and, given events in recent weeks, in the north, too) could turn into a war.

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