

Why Israel's Mission Must Continue

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Articles & Testimony

Although Israel's military operation in the West Bank may seem like an emotion-driven reaction to terrorist attacks, it is in fact based on precise intelligence and well-defined military objectives. Thus, while the government appreciates the depth of American strategic support to Israel's security, it has to continue certain aspects of the operation despite American expectations and Secretary of State Colin Powell's mission to the region.

The reason is simple: To cut short the operation now, with Israeli Defense Force troops scoring important accomplishments in numerous places, would limit the benefits of the operation and only make more likely the need to send troops back into Palestinian cities, villages and refugee camps in the future.

The need for Israel to act directly against the terrorists became clear after the suicide bombing on March 27 in a hotel in Netanya. That bombing ended a bloody month in which 130 Israelis died at the hands of terrorists -- a proportion of the Israeli population twice as large as that of Americans killed on Sept. 11. These killings occurred despite Israeli compliance with the efforts of Anthony Zinni, the United States emissary, to achieve a cease-fire and in the context of the Palestinian Authority's use of terror as an alternative to negotiations.

Israel began a large-scale offensive in the West Bank aimed at the operatives, means and support structure of the terrorist organizations. Clearly such operations are not meant to eliminate terrorism in the long run, but they can have a very significant effect in the short run. This military approach is in accordance with Israel's long-term strategy, which is to fight against terrorism both as an end in itself and as a way to prove to the Palestinians the futility of armed struggle.

The choice of targets focused on the terrorist organizations and especially on the location of their senior activists. In the village of Tubas, east of Nablus, Israeli Special Forces, using precise intelligence, located and killed six senior Hamas terrorists. The head of the group was Qeis Odwan, commander of the Hamas military wing in the northern West Bank. He was personally responsible for several suicide bombings, including the Netanya bombing, that together took 75 Israeli lives. Israeli troops also killed Akram al-Atrash, Qeis Odwan's counterpart in Hebron, who had an equally gruesome resume. Terrorists from Fatah's Tanzim group, as well as Palestinian Authority officials and security officers involved in terrorism, are also on the wanted list. Israeli forces are currently searching for Marwan Barghouti, the Tanzim leader whose involvement in the fatal shooting in Hadera in January was recently exposed.

So far, the two-week-old operation has proved to be a considerable success. Hundreds of militant terrorists have been killed, and several hundred more were apprehended and interrogated, including senior people that the Israeli forces had included on terrorist lists submitted to both the Palestinian Authority and American officials. Large amounts of weapons and ammunition -- all illegal under Israel-Palestinian Authority agreements -- were captured in the course of the operation, including hundreds of explosive devices, ready-to-use suicide bombs, sniper rifles and anti-tank rocket launchers. Also captured were workshops for the manufacture of explosives. While Palestinian smugglers will try to replace these items over time, there can be no doubt that their capture saved Israeli lives.

In the cities of Tulkarm and Qalqilya the Israeli Defense Forces faced relatively little resistance. Most of the militants surrendered, shortening the battle and saving lives on both sides. Subsequently, the defense force completed its mission and withdrew, as it is withdrawing from other places when its mission is completed.

In the Jenin refugee camp, however, hundreds of militants chose the urban setting to serve as a human shield, at great danger to the civilian populace. The militants were led by three senior leaders of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, the group responsible for many suicide bombings inside Israel. To limit the civilian death toll, the defense force decided against bombing the targets from the air and opted for a long and complicated house-to-house ground assault. The death toll in the battle was very heavy on both sides. Unfortunately, the prolonged fighting meant a large number of civilians were caught in the crossfire.

Originally, the Israeli Army allotted four to eight weeks to achieve the objectives of this operation. There are no illusions that there can be a purely military solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. However, the recent operation has already had a very real effect in disrupting terrorist plans and degrading terrorist capabilities. In human terms, that will translate into many Israeli lives saved. ❖

Los Angeles Times

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