

SHIFTING GOALPOSTS: INTERPRETATION OF 'VICTORY' IN ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT IN GAZA, 2008-09

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Introduction

History does not record many instances where the opposing sides in an armed conflict have both claimed victory at its conclusion. Examples of Pyrrhic victory, a triumph or objective that is achieved at exorbitant cost, have been chronicled, although their numbers are not plentiful either.¹ More numerous examples may be found where the adversaries have fought to a stalemate, and then, not infrequently, after a hiatus, resuming the fray to decisively settle the issue. A resolved outcome would have a greater chance of establishing lasting peace between belligerents than an inconclusive encounter that would probably leave all contesting parties disgruntled, and on the lookout for the earliest opportunity to bring matters to a conclusion.

Objective of the study

The December 2008-January 2009 Israeli military operation in Gaza is the latest instance of both belligerents declaring themselves as victors at the end of the conflict. This paper takes a look at the rationale provided by the two sides for holding to their respective viewpoint, and the possible ramifications that their declarations might have for them and the political-security issue of the Middle East.

Methodology and limitations

The proximity of this study to the actual event being studied, as well as its objective, and the subject matter itself constrain it to being subjected to a qualitative method for analyzing and arriving at

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¹ Pyrrhus (born 319 BC, died 272 BC) was king of Epirus in ancient northwest Greece. The Greek enclave of Tarentum solicited his help against Rome in 281 BC. In the ensuing battles at Heraclea and Asculum, he won costly victories, which engendered the term "Pyrrhic victory".

conclusions. The stated objective generally does not lend itself to a quantitative analysis, much less so in the context of both the subject matter, which is primarily a study of perspectives and political gamesmanship, and the propinquity of the event and the investigation and analysis of one of its aspects.

Undertaking an examination of current history is itself a major limitation pertaining to the study. For cogent reasons, not the least because of the imperative of maintaining secrecy over sensitive material by the contending parties, important primary documents would usually not be made available. Therefore, one has to rely much, of necessity, on contemporary accounts as available in the media. However authentic and authoritative the news might be in the generally acceptable media channels, a nagging doubt will still persist in the serious (even more so in the stringent) researcher/scholar that their reports might not hold up against revelations of official documents. This is a hazard that a student of current history often has to face. However, verbatim reporting of statements by official personages, particularly when cross-checked against the reportage in several media channels, would suffice as authentic primary documents.

The concept of war

Peter Gay once composed these thoughts, which provide a theoretical underpinning to the stated objective of this study: "It was easy to look upon the life of men in society as a constant struggle, but not so easy to interpret the meaning of the struggle. Which, in fact, were the struggling units? Individual men, groups, business firms, tribes, races, nation-states? It made a great deal of practical difference how this question was answered."² Some of the points he raises will be used in trying to make some sense of both Israel and Hamas declaring themselves to be victors at the end of Tel Aviv's 22-day offensive against Hamas, the militant fundamentalist Islamic group that controls Gaza. The struggle was short and intense, not an all-out war in the classic sense of the term, which is organized armed conflict between groups of people or states, but, by that very definition, not far short of it

² Peter Gay, "Darwin and Freud", in *The Columbia History of the World*, John A. Garraty and Peter Gay, eds. (NY: Harper & Row, 1972), pp. 958-9.

either. While Gaza is not the notional state of Palestine, and Hamas not made up of all the Palestinians living in the occupied or limited autonomous region of that notional state, it was, nonetheless, a conflict between a state and a group of people.³

Only by a mere technicality, then, the Israel-Hamas conflict escapes being labeled a full-scale war. Three characterizations of the concept of war, all given from an anthropological standpoint, would help us in understanding the theme of our study. The essence of war is expressively articulated in this passage: “The concept of war describes a state of confrontation in which the possibility of violence is always present and deemed legitimate by the perpetrating party, and in which actual violent encounters occur on a regular basis.”⁴ The rationale for war, approached from a realpolitik standpoint, is pithily enunciated: “Wars occur when those who make the decision to fight estimate that it is in their material interests to do so.”⁵ In contrast, from a humanistic angle, “The ‘civilian’ mode of thinking about war is characterised by the perception of war as opposite to peace, where peace is considered to be the normal way of living, civilised, moral, and with juridical routines of dealing with unacceptable destruction and manslaughter leading to punishment. War is a disruption, an interval of time, which is abnormal, and generally impossible to happen to ‘us’.”⁶

³ Hamas, acronym of Harakat al-Muqawimah al-Islamiyyah (“Islamic Resistance Movement”). Founded in 1988 by Sheikh Ahmad Yasin, the group believes that Palestine cannot be surrendered to non-Muslims. In keeping with that line of thought, Hamas is committed to Israel’s destruction and the creation of a Palestinian Islamic state. It opposes the 1993 peace agreement (now effectively moribund) between the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and Israel, an outcome of which was Tel Aviv’s recognition of the PLO. PLO (Arabic Munazzamat al-Tahrir al-Filastiniyyah) was formed in 1964 as an umbrella political organization representing the Palestinians in their quest for a sovereign independent state. In course of time it recognized Israel’s right to exist, though several militant factions demurred. These concise portrayals of Hamas and PLO have been gathered from *Britannica Ready Reference Encyclopedia*, Vols. 4 (p.251) and 7 (p.199) (New Delhi: Encyclopedia Britannica (India) Pvt. Ltd., 2006).

⁴ Ingo W. Schroder and Bettina E. Schmidt, “Introduction: Violent imaginaries and violent practices”, in *Anthropology of Violence and Conflict*, Bettina E. Schmidt and Ingo W. Schroder, eds. (London: Routledge, 2001), p.4.

⁵ R.B. Ferguson, “Explaining War”, in *The Anthropology of War*, Jonathan Haas, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 30.

⁶ Ivana Macek, “Predicament of War: Sarajevo experiences and ethics of war”, in *Anthropology of Violence and Conflict*, op.cit. p.198.