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## **The neighborhood bully strikes again**

By Gideon Levy

Israel embarked yesterday on yet another unnecessary, ill-fated war. On July 16, 2006, four days after the start of the Second Lebanon War, I wrote: "Every neighborhood has one, a loud-mouthed bully who shouldn't be provoked into anger... Not that the bully's not right - someone did harm him. But the reaction, what a reaction!"

Two and a half years later, these words repeat themselves, to our horror, with chilling precision. Within the span of a few hours on a Saturday afternoon, the IDF sowed death and destruction on a scale that the Qassam rockets never approached in all their years, and Operation "Cast Lead" is only in its infancy.

Once again, Israel's violent responses, even if there is justification for them, exceed all proportion and cross every red line of humaneness, morality, international law and wisdom.

What began yesterday in Gaza is a war crime and the foolishness of a country. History's bitter irony: A government that went to a futile war two months after its establishment - today nearly everyone acknowledges as much - embarks on another doomed war two months before the end of its term.

In the interim, the loftiness of peace was on the tip of the tongue of Ehud Olmert, a man who uttered some of the most courageous words ever said by a prime minister. The loftiness of peace on the tip of his tongue, and two fruitless wars in his sheath. Joining him is his defense minister, Ehud Barak, the leader of the so-called left-wing party, who plays the role of senior accomplice to the crime.

Israel did not exhaust the diplomatic processes before embarking yesterday on another dreadful campaign of killing and ruin. The Qassams that rained down on the communities near Gaza turned intolerable, even though they did not sow death. But the response to them needs to be fundamentally different: diplomatic efforts to restore the cease-fire - the same one that was initially breached, one should remember, by Israel when it unnecessarily bombed a tunnel - and then, if those efforts fail, a measured, gradual military response.

But no. It's all or nothing. The IDF launched a war yesterday whose end, as usual, is hoping someone watches over us.

Blood will now flow like water. Besieged and impoverished Gaza, the city of refugees, will pay the main price. But blood will also be unnecessarily spilled on our side. In its foolishness, Hamas brought this on itself and on its people, but this does not excuse Israel's overreaction.

The history of the Middle East is repeating itself with despairing precision. Just the frequency is increasing. If we enjoyed nine years of quiet between the Yom Kippur War and the First Lebanon War, now we launch wars every two years. As such, Israel proves that there is no connection between its public relations talking points that speak of peace, and its belligerent conduct.

Israel also proves that it has not internalized the lessons of the previous war. Once again, this war was preceded by a frighteningly uniform public dialogue in which only one voice was heard - that which called for striking, destroying, starving and killing, that which incited and prodded for the commission of war crimes.

Once again the commentators sat in television studios yesterday and hailed the combat jets that bombed police stations, where officers responsible for maintaining order on the streets work. Once again, they urged against letting up and in favor of continuing the assault. Once again, the journalists described the pictures of the damaged house in Netivot as "a difficult scene." Once again, we had the nerve to complain about how the world was transmitting images from Gaza. And once again we need to wait a few more days until an alternative voice finally rises from the darkness, the voice of wisdom and morality.

In another week or two, those same pundits who called for blows and more blows will compete among themselves in leveling criticism at this war. And once again this will be gravely late.

The pictures that flooded television screens around the world yesterday showed a parade of corpses and wounded being loaded into and unloaded from the trunks of private cars that transported them to the only hospital in Gaza worthy of being called a hospital. Perhaps we once again need to remember that we are dealing with a wretched, battered strip of land, most of whose population consists of the children of refugees who have endured inhumane tribulations.

For two and a half years, they have been caged and ostracized by the whole world. The line of thinking that states that through war we will gain new allies in the Strip; that abusing the population and killing its sons will sear this into their consciousness; and that a military operation would suffice in toppling an entrenched regime and thus replace it with another one friendlier to us is no more than lunacy.

Hezbollah was not weakened as a result of the Second Lebanon War; to the contrary. Hamas will not be weakened due to the Gaza war; to the contrary. In a short time, after the parade of corpses and wounded ends, we will arrive at a fresh cease-fire, as occurred after Lebanon, exactly like the one that could have been forged without this superfluous war.

In the meantime, let us now let the IDF win, as they say. A hero against the weak, it bombed dozens of targets from the air yesterday, and the pictures of blood and fire are designed to show Israelis, Arabs and the entire world that the neighborhood bully's strength has yet to wane. When the bully is on a rampage, nobody can stop him.