National Post View: Latest Study Offers Another Gloomy View of Eternal Stalemate Between Israel and Gaza

June 23, 2015

National Post

<http://news.nationalpost.com/full-comment/national-post-view-latest-study-offers-another-gloomy-view-of-eternal-stalemate-between-israel-and-gaza>

It’s all so depressingly familiar now: another war in the Middle East, another report. Monday’s release of the United Nations Human Rights Council’s findings into last year’s conflict between Israel and Palestinian terrorists in the Gaza Strip made grim enough reading on its own, with its vivid descriptions of innocent civilians, on both sides, torn apart by heavy weapons. The certainty of such events repeating themselves makes reading it all the gloomier a task.

The report, which notes that it did not receive co-operation from either side, was the product of interviews with witnesses, reviews of photographic and video evidence and publicly released materials. The conclusions are about what you would expect: both Israel and various Palestinian terror organizations are cited for probable war crimes. In Israel’s case, the concerns mostly lie with the use of heavy weapons in populated areas, resulting in more civilian casualties than can be justified on the basis of military necessity. In the case of the Palestinian terror groups, the report condemns firing mostly unguided weapons into populated areas, or simply declaring population centres to be military bases. Likewise the observed pattern of basing long-range weapons and troops in the immediate vicinity of schools, hospitals, mosques and homes.

On balance, the report is generally reasonable, and includes some suggestions Israel could do well to adopt, including limiting use of the heaviest artillery calibres and largest air-dropped bombs in populated areas, as well as providing more time to evacuate dwellings selected for targeted destruction. The report also lamented that, in many instances, Israel did not provide much justification for why certain targets were selected for destruction, while conceding that in many instances, Israel may well have had such justification, which it refused to share for reasons of operational security.

The problem with the report, as with others before it, is that it misses the point. Yes, the Israel Defense Forces can and should learn from every conflict, and find ways to do better — though they already show more restraint than any nation should reasonably be expected to. But there is simply no way to compare the conduct of Israel, a Western democracy with civilian-led armed forces, with Gaza — essentially a terrorist enclave run by numerous, often competing armed groups, which tragically happen to share the same geographic space as a million trapped civilians.

Israel would no doubt prefer to fight its battles out in an open field somewhere, where it can bring all its high-tech military might to bear in a crushing, decisive military blow. Unfortunately, it happens to be located next to a heavily populated urban area full of well-armed people that hate it — and who aren’t shy about launching attacks from civilian installations, among other violations of the laws of war. Israel has tried unilaterally withdrawing all its troops from the area; that hasn’t precisely worked out. So long as groups in Gaza continue to rain rockets and mortars on Israeli civilians, and dig tunnels below the border, Israel will have to keep defending itself where its enemies are attacking it from — with all the carnage that urban fighting inevitably entails.

It’s a bleak reality, but a reality nonetheless. The only real cause for hope can be found on Israel’s other borders: those with Jordan, Egypt and even the West Bank. Israel is clearly capable of living in peace with Muslim, Arab neighbours. In Gaza, it lacks only a willing partner.

Israel should indeed read this latest UN report, and implement such of its recommendations as make military and moral sense. But until and unless fresh leadership comes to Gaza, it will still face the same existential dilemma.