Gaza: The War of the Weak
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With Israel's ground invasion of Gaza, the world's media are busy choosing sides, much like a football game where fans cheer only for their own team. The truth is that both sides have points in their favor as well as plenty of blame; neither side is completely in the right or in the wrong. In the end, it is innocent civilians on both sides that suffer the most.

This is a war of weak politicians trying to look tough. Not a single leader is acting from a position of political strength. But they each hope that if they act that way, they will persuade people they are strong.

The most vocal international supporter of Israel's war against Gaza, the United States' President George Bush, has shown himself to be a weak leader through his poor handling of the crises faced by this country. Now in the last few weeks of his presidency, he is a lame duck.

In the Israeli government, there are three weak politicians. The first is the Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, whose position is even worse than lame-duck. Because of his indictment in corruption scandals, Olmert resigned from the office of prime minister last September and from the leadership of Kadima, the largest political party in the Knesset (Israel's parliament). Unfortunately, he remains interim prime minister until national elections in February.

The second weak figure is the Israeli Foreign Minister, Tzipi Livni. She won September's election to head the Kadima Party. But she was unable to form a new government and so forced Israel into early national elections in February.

The third politician aiming to look strong is the coalition government's Defense Minister, Ehud Barak, who leads the Labor Party. Barak was prime minister in 2000 when Israel's carefully planned exit from Lebanon became disorganized (to put it mildly) and wound up enhancing the stature of the terrorist organization Hezbollah -- which has since become a dominant power in the Lebanese legislature.

While Livni and Barak are not quite "peace-niks," since they represent the moderate centrist parties of Israeli politics, both are willing to make peace with the Palestinians under the proper conditions. In polling for the February elections, however, the popularity of both lags behind that of Binyamin Netanyahu, the leader of the conservative Likud Party. This is because of the usual right-left perception; the conservatives are assumed to be tough, while those willing to negotiate peace must continually renew their "strong-man" credentials.

So Israel is weak because its political leaders lack the political success necessary for a strong government.

The problem for Hamas' leaders is that they are weak despite their electoral success. In January 2006, Hamas overwhelmingly defeated their political opponents in elections across the Palestinian Territories -- elections that were internationally sanctioned and supported by both Israel and the United States. Hamas won 76 of the 132 seats in the Palestinian parliament. In its victory, Hamas continued to refuse to recognize the state of Israel and emphasized its goal of liberating Palestine from Israel.

This was the high-point of Hamas' rise. Since Hamas had been declared a terrorist organization by the United States, it received little recognition from the West. Israel, the United States and European governments refused to talk with them. Even Palestine's President, Mahmoud Abbas, worked with them only under duress -- and within a year Abbas's Fatah party had been driven from Gaza at gunpoint. Diplomatically isolated, Hamas next found itself walled up within Gaza by a physical air, land and sea blockade imposed by Israel. It was soon unable to perform even minimal functions of government, e.g., to supply food, water sanitation, electricity and health facilities.

The one success Hamas has had is to fire rockets into populated areas of Israel, the land of its oppressor. These unaimed, untargetable missiles do not win or gain anything strategically, although they occasionally kill a random Israeli civilian. But the rockets show Gazans that Hamas is still attacking the "enemy Israel" despite everything. At the time of writing of this column, rockets were still landing in Israel -- even with the mounting casualties among Gaza's civilians.

In the end, this is a war of the weak attempting to look strong at all costs.