



Iron Dome: Has the Euphoria Been Justified?

by Prof. Avi Kober

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 199, February 25, 2013

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Early praise for the Iron Dome system may be deserved. Yet Israel's deterrence capability has not been enhanced, and the Iron Dome may initiate an arms race among Israel's enemies to try and defeat it. Moreover, its success lowers the chance for Israeli punitive actions that are needed for deterrence.

In early February 2013 the IDF deployed the Iron Dome anti-rocket system in northern Israel, to fend off potential threats in the area. This system is truly an impressive technological achievement. It was evaluated as an asset, thanks to the system's ability not only to save lives but to also afford greater freedom of choice for the political and military echelons regarding when and how to respond to attacks on the home front.

Praise for Iron Dome

Even initial critics have admitted that the system's ability to intercept some 90 percent of the missiles fired at Israel during Operation Pillar of Defense in Gaza in November 2012 – which would have otherwise hit populated areas – is beyond the developers' expectations and a significant contribution to Israeli defensive capabilities. The system saved lives of civilians and troops, which makes it attractive to Israel's casualty-averse society, particularly in conflicts that do not endanger Israel's most vital security interests, let alone its survival. Its high cost is still lower than the damage inflicted by Palestinian or Hizballah rockets on property, let alone the cost in human loss. Each intercepting Iron Dome missile costs approximately \$50,000, whereas the damage inflicted by one rocket on Israeli targets is much higher, estimated at around \$750,000 for one "average" middle age Israeli killed or \$190,000 for damage caused to property. The United States' readiness to assist Israel in

funding the system means that its burden on Israel's security budget is, and will be, tolerable.

Criticism of Iron Dome

A handful of strategic experts have spoiled the euphoria, raising some doubts regarding the system's efficiency. For example, some claim that the system can hardly cope with thousands of enemy rockets, particularly with the challenge of multiple rocket launchers, and that it has from the start been technologically unable to defend the communities located close to the Gazan border; such a defense would require other systems, like laser interceptors. They also argue that the effect of Iron Dome is limited because some rockets manage to penetrate the system.

But there are additional negative aspects of the system that should be considered. A major problem is created by the fact that it does not produce deterrence. Iron Dome is unable to destroy the appetite of the Palestinians and Hizballah to attack Israel, as it contributes neither to deterrence-by-denial nor to deterrence-by-punishment. In the former type of deterrence the attacker is expected to pay a high price by being denied by the adversary's defensive deployment, while in the latter type of deterrence the attacker is expected to pay a high price as a result of the painful offensive retaliation of the adversary. Currently, Iron Dome can do no more than frustrate the challenger, not deter him. Furthermore, the tacit, often unintended message conveyed by deploying defensive systems – that the challenged side is ready to tolerate attacks on its home front – has put Israel in a position of weakness against an enemy that is ready to kill and be killed, and has negatively affected its deterrent posture.

It is also argued that Israeli towns will not be held hostage by Palestinian groups. This is only partially true. The sirens and the 10 percent of the rockets that will penetrate Iron Dome-covered areas – and even rockets that were intentionally not intercepted because the system's radar had calculated that they were going to fall in empty areas – have a demoralizing effect. The trickle of rockets still forces Israeli citizens to seek shelter during rocket attacks and disrupt routine life. Even a more complete system will not allow the maintenance of a peacetime routine, because the debris of the intercepted rockets, as well as that of the interceptors themselves, will be a danger to people in open areas. Furthermore, due to Israel's ability to sustain rocket attacks thanks to a low casualty rate, border communities are doomed to suffer from prolonged conflict and be held hostage by Hamas and Hizballah.

The argument that the system provides freedom to the political leadership and the IDF time to prepare for offensive actions is problematic, too. It can easily be presented the other way around: a lack of casualties among Israeli civilians might make any large-scale military punishment operation almost illegitimate, both externally and domestically.

Finally, the problem of Iron Dome to handle large quantities of rockets launched against Israel serves as a catalyst for an arms race, as it encourages challengers to acquire large quantities of missiles and rockets to penetrate the defensive cover. It was for this reason that during the Cold War the superpowers agreed to avoid deployment of such systems, save for in very limited areas. Israel's tiny size does justify such deployment, but this cannot change the fact that Israel's enemies have long ago identified Israel's active defensive weaknesses and have been arming massively for this purpose, a process that challenges Iron Dome and other active defense systems.

Conclusion

The most positive aspect of Iron Dome is the system's life-saving capability, and the feeling among Israeli citizens that they are now better protected, which should not be underestimated. Some doubts exist regarding the system's benefits, though. The system does not provide protection for those living close to the border, and hardly frees the home front from disruption of daily life and demoralization. In addition, it is counterproductive as far as deterrence is concerned, and might create the impression that Israel is prepared to tolerate enemy rocket attacks. Furthermore, Iron Dome might tie Israeli hands rather than afford freedom of choice and action as far as retaliation is concerned, and could weaken Israel's traditional offensive approach. Finally, the system might stimulate a quantitative arms race as a result of an Arab attempt to take advantage of Iron Dome's difficulties in coping with a large quantity of rockets.

Former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert rightly said that "we will not protect ourselves to death." Iron Dome is good news only on one condition: that the political and military echelons in Israel acknowledge its limitations.

Prof. Avi Kober is an associate professor of political studies at Bar-Ilan University and a senior research associate at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies.