



## **Hit Hamas Hard to Create a Different Strategic Balance Against Islamic Terrorism**

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** It is time for a full-scale offensive against Hamas and the other Islamist-Jihadist groups in Gaza. Israel should take over Gaza temporarily; destroy the terrorist infrastructure as much as possible, to the point where Israel will then be able to minimize future damage to its cities by limited military actions against the Hamas infrastructure. In short, Israel should adopt the highly successful anti-terrorist strategy it employed in the West Bank over the past decade. This will not completely end terrorism from Gaza, nor will it fully alleviate the plight of Israeli communities adjacent to Gaza, but it will considerably reduce the threat to Israel's major population centers.

Israeli military strategy towards Judea and Samaria (the West Bank) has been vastly different from its strategy towards Gaza. Israel assessed correctly in the second intifada that the Palestinian Authority (PA) in Judea and Samaria was easy to penetrate because of its relatively low density of population, but difficult to contain because of its size and the length of the green line (over 300 kilometers long). Gaza, by contrast, was easy to contain but difficult to penetrate because of its small size and high density of population, especially its very large refugee camps.

Israeli moves, consciously or unwittingly, expressed these differences. In 2002, Israel engaged in two massive offensives against Yasser Arafat's PA, its security forces, Fatah and the other terrorist organizations. It temporarily took over the big Palestinian towns, and has been "mowing the grass" ever since through daily preventive arrests of terrorist operatives across the entire area. This policy, coupled with security cooperation with more pliant PA security services under Muhammad Abbas' rule, has had a dramatic effect. Terrorism in Judea and Samaria has declined to levels that prevailed before the first intifada and have remained low ever since.

In Gaza, Israel took a different path. Because Gaza was difficult to penetrate, but presumably easy to contain, Israel decided to withdraw unilaterally. The results, as we all know, were much more problematic. Improved rocketry eroded the assumption that Gaza could be contained. Meanwhile, Israel has avoided a massive ground attack on Gaza on the assumption that it is not only difficult to penetrate Gaza, but that such a ground attack will have no lasting effects and might even make the situation worse.

Proponents of the status-quo thesis argue that a massive attack on Gaza to destroy the military infrastructure of Hamas will lead to its “jihadization”; to a Gaza controlled by a variety of small Jihadist groups at Hamas’ expense. Unlike Hamas today, these groups will not be a stable “strategic address.” They neither will be deterred nor subject to pressure to desist from terrorist activity.

Is the status-quo thesis valid or is it now the time to engage in a full-scale offensive against Hamas and the other Islamist-jihadist groups in Gaza?

The answer is the latter; it is time for a full scale offensive. Israel should take over Gaza temporarily – destroy the terrorist infrastructure as much as possible, to the point where Israel will then be able to minimize future damage to its cities by limited military actions against the Hamas infrastructure. In short, Israel should adopt the highly successful anti-terrorist strategy it employed Judea and Samaria over the past decade. This will not completely end terrorism from Gaza, nor will it fully alleviate the plight of Israeli communities adjacent to Gaza, but it will considerably reduce the threat to Israel’s major population centers.

Maintaining the status quo, by contrast, is increasingly dangerous. After two rounds of punishing limited offensives, one can surmise that the strategic address argument hardly works. More worrisomely, Hamas is aiming at linking Israeli moves against the Hamas infrastructure in Judea and Samaria to the escalation in rocket strikes against Israel.

Were Israel to implicitly accept this linkage – and it might be doing so already by curtailing its moves in the West Bank against Hamas to cajole the organization into agreeing to a lull – this would not only directly threaten the security of Israelis but also the longevity of Abbas’ PA.

Were Israel to accept this linkage, Hamas could kidnap, kill and build-up its infrastructure in the West Bank under the threat that Israeli moves against Hamas will provoke massive rocket attacks. Hamas would essentially be calling the cards in the West Bank, undoing the achievements of the 2002 offensive. Hamas infrastructure would pose a direct threat to the PA; a complete change in the balance of power between Israel and Hamas. Yet, this is what the return to the “status-quo” threatens to bring. In politics, there is

rarely a prolonged status-quo, certainly not in a conflict as bitter as between Israel and Hamas.

The future ramifications of agreeing to the linkage might even be more severe. With the rising power of the 'Islamic State in Iraq and Syria' organization and the threat it poses to Jordan's security, it is absolutely vital to maintain an Israeli free hand against all terrorism in West Bank.

Other arguments made in favor of the status-quo can also be questioned. A Hamas weakened by direct Israeli assault and threatened by other Jihadist groups, might be willing to be a more pliant strategic address just as was the PA after the 2002 ground offensive.

A weakened Hamas will also facilitate Israeli intelligence penetration in Gaza. At present, Hamas counter-intelligence has partially succeeded uncovering informants. The smaller Jihadist groups do not possess these capabilities nor will they be likely to possess them in the more fluid situation that will prevail in Gaza after the assault.

Even if Hamas were overwhelmed by other Jihadist groups they might spend more time fighting each other than against the Zionist enemy, as we see today in Syria. The Syrian regime has recently made major gains in large part because the ISIL is as busy fighting al-Nusra and other groups as it is against the Syrians. In Gaza, it will probably be little different. Certainly, these organizations will not have the capabilities of Hamas. They will hardly enjoy the same level of tactical support from Iran as Hamas enjoyed in the past.

A jihadist Gaza also will strengthen Egyptian-Israeli cooperation to counter the threat and might even garner the support of the Europeans worried by the Jihadi rise in Iraq and Syria, the increasing participation of European citizens in these battlefields, and the obvious ramification that their participation will have in increasing terrorism in Europe itself.

Israel should capitalize on these opportunities to strike hard against Hamas. It's time to replicate in Gaza the success of the 2002 Operation Defensive Shield in the West Bank, even if the costs will be greater and the gains less spectacular.

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