



## Wise Tactical Choices in Gaza

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Since the launch of Operation Protective Edge, Israel has made a series of wise tactical choices that contribute to the diplomatic and military effort. Had Israel launched the operation against Hamas tunnels sooner, prior to the abduction of the three Israeli teenagers, Israel would have been accused of initiating an unnecessary military operation. Had Jerusalem not accepted the first cease-fire proposal, which would have left the tunnel network intact, Israel would not have enjoyed international legitimacy for the fighting that ensued.

Over the past few weeks, some have argued that Israel should have launched Operation Protective Edge sooner, and that it should have taken the initiative before Hamas' tunnels became an actual threat. Others have argued that had Hamas agreed to the first cease-fire Israel offered, the enemies' tunnel system would have remained intact and ready to be used for terror attacks in the future.

The first argument has no merit. Israel cannot launch a complex military operation every time a new threat is detected, and even when a threat is ascertained, the ramifications of a military operation must be carefully thought through, and various aspects – not just military ones – must be considered.

Imagine if we had launched a counter-tunnel operation a year ago. In all likelihood, it would have been very similar to the current military campaign. We may have had fewer casualties had we been the ones to surprise Hamas, but such a surprise attack would have surely resulted in a greater number of civilian Palestinian casualties.

What would we have done had the IDF suffered dozens of casualties without the prelude of the abduction of the three Israeli teenagers in the West Bank? What would

the world's reaction have been to a large Israeli operation had it not been provoked? What would have been the reaction of the Arab world to the deaths of thousands of innocent civilians in Gaza?

Israel would have found itself accused of launching an unnecessary military operation, and it would have been unable to offer any explanation other than the images of half-dug tunnels. When fighting non-state entities, a country like Israel must secure international legitimacy from its allies, and it must also secure a consensus among Israeli society.

This is why Israel does not strike targets in Lebanon, despite the fact that there is no doubt that the threat posed by Hezbollah missiles is much greater than the one posed by Gaza's tunnels.

Countries rarely respond to threats in the making, and Israel itself has done so only during the 1956 Suez Crisis, by launching Operation Kadesh, and in the 1982 Lebanon War. Israel's right to launch a pre-emptive strike is best reserved for dealing with existential threats in the region; and even then, this right cannot be taken for granted.

We would also be wise to remember that Israel has used this time to improve its own capabilities. For example, the Iron Dome's interception rates are better than they were a year and a half ago. Upgrading the system would have taken some time, providing another reason to wait. It is likely that the ISF has also used this time to introduce improvements in other areas as well.

As for that first cease-fire that could have prevented Israel from dealing with the tunnels, it is now clear to all that Israel made a wise choice by agreeing to hold its fire, as it resulted in international legitimacy for the fighting that ensued, despite the devastation in Gaza.

The move also bolstered the consensus within Israeli society that this was a defensive move Israel was forced to launch because the other side was clearly not interested in a cease-fire.

It is impossible to plan for all possible future scenarios during the decision-making process in these cases and more often than not one has to gamble on the result. A smart leader knows better than to take unnecessary risks that might result in bigger threats to his country, but then again, it is important to take calculated risks to mark significant achievements.

As far as the tunnels are concerned, the gamble paid off. Hamas was likely to reject a cease-fire deal at that point, the military had yet to sustain casualties, and the worst case scenario entailed deferring the counter-tunnel operation for a while longer.

On the other hand, it was also clear that Israel's willingness to call a truce despite Hamas fire would afford the IDF the leeway necessary to find and destroy the tunnels, making it a risk worth taking.

Currently, the future of the Gaza campaign must be determined while keeping broader interests in mind, and while considering the needs of the Israeli public, the military campaign, and Israel's diplomatic relationships.

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