



Hamas was Defeated, Until the Next Time

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Executive Summary: During Operation Protective Edge, Hamas was clearly defeated, but was not destroyed. Israel was successful in significantly degrading the military capabilities of Hamas and forced it to accept the Egyptian-Israeli ceasefire unconditionally. Despite criticism of Israel's "disproportionate" response and over seventy Israeli casualties, the operation was supported by many key international actors and the fighting caused little damage to Israel. As there is no political solution to the conflict in sight, Israel may be forced to "mow the grass" again and more vigorously so.

Hamas was clearly defeated by Israel in "Operation Protective Edge," but not destroyed. Its destruction was not a goal of Israel's military campaign. What Israel wanted was a weakened Hamas to continue to rule Gaza. The separation between Gaza and the West Bank serves Israel's interest in weakening the Palestinian national movement, which has been and remains a mortal enemy (not a peace partner), at least for the foreseeable future.

Israel decided to once again "[mow the grass](#)" in Gaza under the assumption that it is engaged in a protracted intractable conflict where a patient strategy of attrition is needed to significantly degrade the capabilities of Hamas to harm Israel. This was achieved. About one third of Hamas' missile arsenal and most of its missile production infrastructure was destroyed. Most of the attack tunnels (32) were probably demolished, and almost one thousand Hamas fighters and a few of its leaders were eliminated. More targeted killings and an earlier removal of some of the self-imposed constraints on the use of airpower might have

speeded Hamas' acceptance of a ceasefire and might have spared Gaza much destruction.

The Hamas defeat is clear, because it finally capitulated to the Egyptian cease fire proposal that Hamas had been rejected since July 15. The unlimited ceasefire, as Egypt and Israel demanded, constituted the precondition for future negotiations, and it had no input from Qatar and Turkey, both Hamas supporters. All crossings into Gaza will continue to be controlled by Israel and Egypt, making sure that the rearmament of Hamas will not be easy. Egypt even forced Hamas to swallow a bitter pill such as the presence of the Palestinian Authority (PA) at the Rafah crossing. The Hamas "victory speeches" cannot erase the fact that Hamas eventually gave in unconditionally to Egyptian-Israeli pressure.

Despite much criticism abroad of Israel's "disproportionate" use of force, Israel was allowed for 50 days, quite a long period, to pulverize Hamas installations and their surroundings. It was clear that a large number of Arab states tacitly supported the Israeli endeavor to administer a heavy blow on Hamas. Important international actors, such as India, China and Russia, were rather mute on the Gaza issue for their own reasons. Moreover, the US, the EU and parts of the international community demanded demilitarization of Gaza too. This is of course not attainable without collecting Hamas weaponry by force, but it delegitimizes Hamas violence, while lending legitimacy to Israel's defensive measures.

Any assessment of "Protective Edge" must also calculate the cost to Israel of this offensive. The "Iron Dome" system neutralized almost all rockets fired at Israel's population centers. Most of the country was little affected by the Gaza war, although the sound of sirens probably had a negative psychological effect. Disciplined behavior on part of the civilian public minimized the loss of lives. But the death toll was 72 (over sixty soldiers) and hundreds of wounded. Limited damage was caused primarily to property in the proximity of the Gaza. Direct and indirect costs of the war that amount to several billions of dollars are bearable for the strong Israeli economy.

The caution and the reluctance to use ground forces displayed by Israel were useful in garnering domestic and international legitimacy, but might have a corrosive effect on Israel's deterrence. Such qualities, commendable in a democracy, do not enhance Israel's deterrence in the Middle East. Eagerness to fight, determination and ruthlessness are the prerequisites for building deterrence.

Unfortunately, the military campaign against Hamas underscored tensions in US-Israel relations. The ambiguous attitudes and actions toward Israel on part of the US administration signal less willingness to back its Middle East ally. Moreover, the US was largely irrelevant in the Gaza outcome, as it foolishly tried to involve Turkey and Qatar in management of the crisis and it failed to perceive the centrality of Egypt in the Gaza equation. The Gaza war was another example of the confused Obama administration foreign policy towards the Middle East. The American misfortune is also an Israeli loss as Jerusalem needs and prefers a strong and relevant America.

“Protective Edge” left Gaza in Hamas hands. There is a widespread feeling of unease among Israelis with this outcome. The frustration is understandable, but not warranted. It is beyond Israel’s abilities to impose its preferred leaders on its Arab neighbors. But it is not easy to come to terms with the thought that there is no resolution to the conflict in sight and with the realization that another round of violence is around the corner. Nevertheless, polls have shown for some time that most Israelis understand this predicament, and during the war Israeli society displayed tremendous resilience and solidarity. Indeed, routinization of protracted conflict remains a main challenge for Israeli society.

The domestic political impact of the Gaza war will depend upon the length of the period of calm to be achieved. The longer calm will prevail, the more Prime Minister Netanyahu will be its main beneficiary. The next scheduled election is in November 2017, which is plenty of time for Netanyahu to recover, if the calm holds. If deterrence does not hold and Hamas decides to challenge Netanyahu by firing into Israel over the next three years, the Prime Minister may be forced to “mow the grass” again and more vigorously.

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