



## **The War With Hamas; Decision Time Approaching**

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Israel must decide whether it is willing to tolerate a chronic Hamas threat or risk a long, difficult operation to get rid of it.**

As Operation Protective Edge enters its third week, the real question has yet to be answered, and will have to be addressed in the next few days: Should Israel halt the operation at this time, or expand the ground operation to take over Gaza?

Hamas began the current round of violence by firing hundreds of rockets at Israel, expanding the range of fire, introducing terrorists and aerial drones and attempting to launch multiple tunnel attacks. It may have succeeded in seeing most Israelis run for cover, but other than that, Hamas has little to show for its efforts: three civilians were killed by rocket fire, 30 Israeli soldiers were killed in clashes with terrorists with a few dozen wounded, and the economic damage Israel has suffered is minor compared to its gross national product – regardless of the moral and financial blow made by foreign airlines temporarily suspending flights to Israel.

The feeling that Israel is not in control of the situation, but rather is being dragged along, is perhaps the most difficult aspect of the past few weeks. It is hard to stomach the fact that a terror organization, which is one of Israel's weakest remaining enemies in terms of firepower, has been able to challenge the strongest nation in the Middle East for days and is showing no signs of fatigue. Many in the region view that as a Hamas success.

On the other hand, Israel has mounted a forceful response. Using precision weapons, the Israeli Air Force has dropped thousands of tons of explosives on Gaza Strip, limiting its operations due to its desire to avoid civilian casualties as much as possible.

The question of how to address the terror tunnels has been at the forefront of the ground incursion since its very beginning. Military and political decision-makers have been aware of the complexity of the threat and the difficulties of dealing with it.

As the aerial operation continued and Hamas rejected the cease-fire proposals Israel had agreed to time and again, the opportunity for a difficult but necessary ground operation presented itself — especially given the international legitimacy lent to Israel's actions. The potential IDF casualties, and projected Palestinian death toll, which is higher since Hamas was preventing Palestinian civilians from leaving areas where tunnels have been dug, were also considered.

The IDF ground operation, which is very limited geographically, is geared toward one objective: locating and destroying tunnels leading from Gaza Strip to Israel. Though limited in scope, this mission is anything but simple, as it requires seizing control of the open area between the Palestinian side of the border and the nearby urban areas, maintaining control of the area where tunnel entryways have been found, and engaging in urban warfare against a well-prepared, well-entrenched enemy.

The IDF is meeting its operational goals despite suffering losses. The military has been able to locate dozens of tunnels, it is exercising due caution while searching for additional tunnels, and destroying those already seized. Using the proper procedures to prevent terrorists from infiltrating the border, and assisted by Iron Dome on the home front, the IDF has been able to prevent Hamas and its allies from marking any real achievements. Hamas' impotence is doubly evident against the backdrop of the unprecedented destruction of its infrastructure in Gaza Strip and its international isolation.

Still, Hamas has not been brought to its knees and its operatives keep launching missiles into Israel. It has been able to get foreign carriers to cancel flights to and from Ben-Gurion International Airport, its operatives are tenaciously fighting to preserve the tunnels that have yet to be seized by the IDF, and Hamas has been able to kill and wound Israeli soldiers.

## **Diplomatic clock ticking**

The Gaza Strip has always been a hotbed for terrorist cells, but between 1967, when Israel seized it in the Six-Day War, and the 1993 Oslo Accords, they had never fired at Israel.

The buildup of firepower in Gaza started after the implementation of the Oslo Accords (1995), when the IDF left the urban areas where most Palestinians resided. Five years later, the Qassam fire on southern Israel began. A decade later, in a reckless move of security, Israel disengaged from Gaza (2005) and allowed it to connect with Sinai, which was a terrorist hotbed even then.

Hamas wasted no time overrunning Gaza, and even though the strip is home to several terrorist groups, including the Iran-backed Islamic Jihad, none of them have contested Hamas' rule.

Massive amounts of weapons, of every type have been funneled into Gaza in a process abetted by Iran and Hezbollah. This process was accelerated further after the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi's regime in Libya, which has turned the latter into a key source of advanced weapons for terrorists.

The loss of control over the crossings between Sinai and Gaza Strip has brought weapons experts and technology into Gaza, which has been compounded by the smuggling of weapon-manufacturing machinery and critical materials. As a result, Gaza terrorists now possess independent production capabilities for long-range rockets and other weapons, such as drones.

Israel is now facing fierce fighting. Through the years, Hamas has crafted a sophisticated system that allows it to fire rockets for a prolonged period of time, alongside a labyrinth of tunnels that afford them a considerable advantage over any invader.

After two weeks of fighting, world leaders understand Israel's position and are willing to endure the protests by leftists and pro-Palestinian groups, but the diplomatic clock has begun ticking and a decision on the next step has to be made — especially if Hamas continues to reject the Egyptian cease-fire proposal.

Now is the time to ask the real and only important question: Should Israel view the Hamas threat as one does a chronic disease, which has unpleasant yet tolerable daily effects and which requires a difficult treatment every few years; or

should Israel risk a complex, difficult and risky operation that, even if it could alleviate many of the symptoms completely, would require lengthy aftercare?

It is possible to create a reality in which there is no rocket fire from Gaza Strip, just as there is no rocket fire from Judea and Samaria. This, however, requires a complex ground maneuver to seize the strip, which would undoubtedly result in many Israeli casualties. A prelude to this scenario is evident by the high number of IDF casualties sustained so far in the ground operation.

Such a maneuver is also likely to meet hostile international public opinion, including from world leaders that have so far supported Israel's moves. Of course, simply conquering Gaza Strip would not be enough and the IDF and Shin Bet security agency would have to reconstitute the intelligence infrastructure that was lost after Oslo and the disengagement.

The IDF would also have to deploy massive forces on the ground to demilitarize Gaza, arrest Hamas operatives or kill those who refuse to surrender, and essentially reinstate Israel's full military control of Gaza Strip, just as it was prior to the IDF's retreat from the strip's urban areas in 1995.

This kind of control means one thing: the military will deploy its forces across Gaza according to its own consideration — there is no need to be everywhere at all times — and it will operate freely across Gaza as the need arises.

### **The Vacuum Dilemma**

The process of demilitarizing Gaza and arresting Hamas operatives could take between six months and a year, and it is likely to see fierce fighting and many casualties. Hamas will eventually lose its ability to challenge the IDF, which would assume control on the ground, as it has in Judea and Samaria.

IDF intelligence would be used to facilitate further arrests and preventative actions. As long as Israeli troops are on the ground, the level of difficulty and risk would plummet and the majority of terrorist capabilities would be thwarted. Even if terror groups would mark the occasional success, it would be temporary and containable. Only once all that is done, will there be no more rocket fire from Gaza at Israel.

The military dilemma, which is complex, may be compounded by a political dilemma, as no one knows who would be willing to assume responsibility for the

Gaza Strip once the IDF completes its mission. The IDF would be unable to leave Gaza, as that may prompt the rise of new and even more radical elements than Hamas. In the current climate in the Middle East, each vacuum is immediately filled with radical Islamist elements, which naturally Israel cannot allow.

This is why Israel might have to reinstate the pre-Oslo "civil administration," overseeing Gaza and its 1.7 million residents. It is an administrative, economic and diplomatic burden, which — notwithstanding the differences stemming from the passage of time — we successfully carried for 28 years, between 1967 and 1995.

It is a difficult but feasible move that will have an unequivocal result. It will halt the Gaza rocket fire and it will put an end to the terrorist tunnels that threatens Israelis on Israeli soil.

A military operation of this scope will see a heavy civilian death toll in the Gaza Strip. Hamas has been using Palestinian civilians as human shields, as their lives are worthless to its leaders. In the long run, taking control of Gaza would save many Palestinian lives, because IDF "maintenance" on the ground would claim fewer lives than the various military campaigns over the years.

This change might make things easier for Israel, despite the scathing international criticism during the incursion and demilitarization process. After all, Israel has been unable to rid itself from "occupation" accusations despite its complete disengagement from Gaza, and the international community has censured it over the civilian death toll in the various military operations mandated by the current situation.

Another option is a return to the cease-fire deal reached in the 2012 Operation Pillar of Defense and the understandings of the 2008 Operation Cast Lead, meaning to pursue a mediated cease-fire as soon as the tunnels are destroyed.

To reach a cease-fire deal, Israel will have to make concessions, especially economic ones, in negotiations that should be held parallel to the continued efforts to target Hamas infrastructure from the air, as well as ongoing rocket fire at Israel.

Such a cease-fire would see Hamas reestablish its undisputed rule in Gaza Strip and allow it to reconstitute its military capabilities ahead of a future conflict, which will take place when it feels that it has become powerful enough. Hamas

may not find it as easy as it once did to rebuild its severely-damaged infrastructure and restore its capabilities. Abdel Fattah el-Sissi's regime in Egypt will not make it easy for Hamas, but this process will only see a change of pace.

Israel will undoubtedly use this time to improve its own capabilities, just as the Iron Dome had undergone updates ahead of Operation Protective Edge; but we have to realize that Hamas will be the one to decide when both parties' capabilities will be put to the test.

I believe that given the extent of the damage Hamas has sustained, along with the Egypt-imposed constraints and international isolation, it would have to undergo a long and difficult rehabilitation process, and therefore a cease-fire — even without an IDF operation that would extend beyond the destruction of the tunnels — could last longer. This lull would also be temporary and we are likely to see the occasional rogue operative fire rockets at communities in the Gaza vicinity; but it is clear that Israel would not violate a cease-fire agreement "over a few rockets." It has not done so in the past, nor will it do so in the future.

Unfortunately, those are the only two realistic options: a lengthy, difficult operation to end the rocket fire on Israel, or a cease-fire that would lead to another round of violence in the future. Other options, ranging from "we should pummel them to the ground, cut off their water and power and starve them out" to "we should negotiate, offer them financial aid and bolster Palestinian Authority President, Mahmoud Abbas' position," have no practical standing and are not grounded in the realities Israel must face with regards to itself (yes, morals and ethics) and with regards to the world.

These suggestions will not achieve anything; or they will lead us back to the aforementioned problem. Financial aid to the Palestinians is important, Hamas has put it as a precondition to a cease-fire and Israel should facilitate it, but it will not change Hamas' animosity.

The reader might wonder what my own opinion is, but my personal opinion is not important. The facts and their correct analysis are far more important, as they allow each reader to come to his own conclusions as to the complexity of the problem and the difficulties pertaining to a future decision.

Israel's decision-makers deserve every praise for the prudence of their actions so far, and we hope for the same in the future. But we should be aware of the fact that the problems they face have no easy solution. Sometimes, simply giving an

issue further consideration before making a careful decision is commendable—and this case deserves even more than a second thought.

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