



## Strategic Implications of Operation Protective Edge

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** The current Israel-Hamas war will have broad strategic implications that go far beyond the immediate results on the battlefield. The war might have an impact on the political future of the Palestinian Authority and the disposition of the West Bank, on the struggle against Iran, on the future of missile wars in the region, and on regional alliance politics.

Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Moshe Yaalon were very hesitant to be drawn into a third round of hostilities against Hamas within a decade and into a ground invasion of Gaza. Israel's hesitation merits exploration. The current confrontation has a strategic context that goes beyond the Israeli logic of a "war of no choice" that probably influenced the Israeli decision-makers. This paper looks at the strategic rationale that should accompany Operation Protective Edge from several viewpoints.

### **Hamas Control of the Gaza Strip**

Hamas is undoubtedly one of the worst enemies Israel has faced. While classic enemies like the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) grudgingly accepted Israel's existence (although not as a Jewish state), Hamas and its counterparts (like Islamic Jihad) are not ready to grant Israel even that limited legitimacy. Hamas' radical view on Israel is clearly expressed in its Charter, and is also repeated vocally at every public opportunity. Its goal is the physical destruction of the Jewish state.

Several strategic thinkers have urged a temporary Israeli takeover of Gaza to fully crush Hamas. These include [Major General \(res.\) Yaakov Amidror](#), [Prof. Hillel Frisch](#), and [David M. Weinberg](#) – all of the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies; and former Homeland Defense Minister Avi Dichter.

Undoubtedly, Hamas should be weakened and neutered as much as possible. But a total uprooting of Hamas from Gaza would have messy strategic implications.

Firstly, such a result could only be accomplished by an all-encompassing military invasion. Such a conquest of the Gaza Strip would be highly costly for Israel in terms of manpower and military effort. More saliently, it would have negative effects on Israel's international diplomatic standing.

The international media has largely ignored the eight years of Hamas' periodic bombardment of southern Israel. Alas, we can predict that the media will continue to ignore the fact that Hamas terrorists hide behind civilians and instead portray only the Gaza civilian casualties, especially women and children. While the Arab world would quietly applaud the destruction of Hamas, it would still shed crocodile tears and scream about the casualties wrought by the hand of Israel. This will bring widespread international condemnation of Israel.

Secondly, the uprooting of Hamas and the handing over of Gaza to Mahmoud Abbas of the Palestinian Authority is not in Israel's interest. Israel has no interest in uniting the West Bank and Gaza under Abbas, before he has proven to be a reliable partner for peace. Abbas has vowed to never recognize Israel as the nation state of the Jewish People – which is rightly Israel's *sin qua non* for an end to the conflict. By refusing to take this most indispensable step, Abbas has indicated that his goal is not real peace.

### **The Israel-Iran Front**

Furthermore, Israeli military conquest of Gaza would distract attention from the strategic campaign against a nuclear Iran. The foremost strategic threat to the existence of the Jewish state is Shiite Iran and its Lebanese offshoot, Hezbollah. It is true that the dethroning of Hamas would take Gaza off the board as a launching pad for rockets against Israel in the event of a strategic confrontation between Jerusalem and Tehran; and thus the destruction of the missile infrastructure in Gaza is essential. However, conquest and military control of Gaza would be exhausting for Israel and may distract world attention from the Iranian existential threat to the Jewish state; indeed, the Iranian threat to global international stability.

### **Missile War against Israel**

Ever since the Gulf War, Israel's enemies have concluded that the answer to Israel's technological superiority was missile warfare. The terror inflicted in 1991 on Israeli cities by Iraqi Scud missiles was not answered by an Israeli response. Israel's restraint was misinterpreted and this eroded its deterrence. The Second Lebanon War seemed to confirm this belief in Israel's vulnerability to missile attacks.

The current round of violence between Israel and the terror groups controlling the Gaza Strip will be studied by Tehran and its allies. Iran has repeatedly threatened that an Israeli preemptive attack to destroy Tehran's nuclear enterprise would result in a far-reaching missile strike against Tel Aviv. But the minimal damage caused by Hamas missiles in this round of hostilities thanks to Israel's very successful anti-missile system (the "Iron Dome") has upset the Israel-is-vulnerable-to-missiles hypothesis.

Undoubtedly, a military confrontation with Iran would be several times more difficult than the conflict with Hamas, but Israel's answer is the Arrow anti-ballistic missile system. The success of Iron Dome and the hopefully-similarly-successful Arrow system should give Iran pause for thought.

### **Alliance Politics in the Middle East**

Despite the unique characteristics of the Middle East, and the raging Islamic civil wars underway across the region, this area of the world is still subject to the vicissitudes of power politics. We are witnessing the emergence of many interesting and new alliances. The current fighting, for example, has brought the common interest against radical Islam between Israel and Egypt into the open. Egypt has thus emerged as key mediator and diplomatic player. By contrast, Turkey's openly anti-Semitic prime minister should not be given a role in mediation.

In its early days, Israel saw potential allies in many non-Arab countries like Iran and Turkey. At this juncture, the alliances have shifted. Israel is cooperating with Egypt on the Gaza front, while Hamas is supported by Iran and Turkey. Another potential Israeli partner is Saudi Arabia, which sees Hamas as an ally of Iran. Unfortunately, it seems that the US has not yet understood the changing map of the region. Washington still seems to think that democracy promotion is a fine thing, even if it brings radical Islam to power.

My point is that the current Israel-Hamas war has broad strategic implications that go far beyond the outcome of local battle results. The impact of the war on the fortunes of the Palestinians, on the struggle against Iran, on the future of missile wars in the region, and on regional alliance politics must be factored into the management of the crisis.

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