



## A Gaza Ceasefire Now Would Be a Strategic Miss

by David M. Weinberg

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Should the proposed Egyptian ceasefire hold and Operation Protection Edge come to an end today, Israelis will breathe a sigh of relief and then have to prepare for the next round of fighting. Israel didn't effect a significant change in the security balance versus Hamas in the Gaza Strip. A draw with the Hamas is strategically unsatisfactory.

Should the proposed Egyptian ceasefire hold and Operation Protection Edge come to an end today, Israelis should breathe a sigh of relief and then prepare for the next round.

It's hard to call this a military victory. It is more a strategic miss. Israel didn't lose this war, but it didn't win it either. It didn't effect a significant change in the strategic balance versus the Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

It's important that the IDF has destroyed about 3,000 of 9,000 rockets that Hamas was estimated to have in its possession prior to the conflict. It's also true that the terms of the ceasefire, as least as published, are near-humiliating from Hamas' perspective. The deal promises the Islamists none of the prisoner releases they have been demanding or any loosening of the blockade on Gaza.

But I think that it will be very hard to argue that Israel crushed Hamas or has truly deterred it from hitting Israel again soon with the remainder of its missile stockpiles. The less than 200 Palestinians killed in the air bombing campaign are meaningless to the Hamas; tragically, this is not a significant number from a Hamas perspective. Nor will the physical destruction of homes and facilities wrought by Israel's bombings frighten the Hamas too much, either.

Most importantly, Hamas senior political and military leadership cadres remain largely untouched. They survived the war just fine, hiding

underground. The “most powerful military in the Middle East” – Israel – failed to successfully target Hamas’ decision-makers.

In the process, Hamas showed that it can force five million Israelis into shelters and target almost every square centimeter of this country. It’s only Israeli technological ingenuity (Iron Dome) and a well-disciplined and truly resilient Israeli home front that prevented serious loss of life in Israel.

I recognize, of course, that this Israeli resilience and relative invulnerability to Hamas attack also plays to the positive side of the ledger, from Israel’s perspective. So do the facts that IDF made no significant mistakes in its air campaign; and that the army blocked all of Hamas’ “strategic surprises” (major terrorist incursions through tunnels and by sea).

If the ceasefire holds, Israel would also be ending this campaign with its international legitimacy largely intact. Most nations of significance supported Israel’s right to defend itself against Hamas rocket attacks, and will do so again in the future. Israel is unlikely to be faced with another UN Goldstone report this time.

Moreover, Israel managed ten days of warfare against the Hamas without bringing about a larger regional conflagration. Hezbollah did not open a second front against Israel, and the West Bank remained mostly quiet.

Finally, it cannot be overlooked that, until this point, the IDF incurred no losses. Had a ground incursion been launched, many very bad things would have inevitably happened: Many Israeli soldiers would have been wounded and killed, some might have been kidnapped, and Israeli public support for the war effort might have frittered away in dismay and dissension. Moreover, large numbers of Palestinians would have been killed, with all the international risk that entails.

Nevertheless, the standoff that has been reached cannot be considered satisfactory from an Israeli strategic perspective. Deterrence of the enemy for the future has not been clearly achieved. A greater deterrent result could have been achieved, I think, by a more extended and even fiercer air bombing campaign, alongside pinpoint commando operations and targeted assassinations. Had Israel held out longer, its intelligence would have improved, Hamas inevitably would have made mistakes, and then the IDF could have pounced with crushing blows – without conducting a full-scale ground invasion.

Prof. Efraim Inbar and Dr. Eitan Shamir argue in a new Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies [study](#) that what Israel has achieved thus far is just about all that can be hoped for in a situation of protracted intractable conflict against an implacable, well-entrenched, non-state enemy like the Hamas. They say

that Israel simply needs to frequently “mow the grass” in order to degrade enemy capabilities. The use of force, they say, cannot be intended to attain impossible political goals, but rather is a strategy of attrition designed to temporarily deter the enemy and bring about periods of quiet along Israel's borders.

“This is constant, hard work,” says Dr. Shamir. “Keeping the enemy off balance and reducing its capabilities requires Israeli military readiness and a willingness to use force intermittently, while maintaining a healthy and resilient Israeli home front despite repeated military offensives.” “It indeed must be frustrating to all Israelis,” adds Prof. Inbar, “but a war of attrition against the Hamas is probably our fate for the long term, and we will quite frequently need to strike Gaza in order keep the enemy off balance.”

My question is whether Israel used enough force this time and inflicted enough pain on the enemy to purchase a sizable chunk of time as respite for Israel before the next round of grass mowing is necessary. I fear not.

Perhaps Prime Minister Netanyahu is playing diplomatic games, accepting the ceasefire proposal under the assumption that Hamas will reject it. This would buy Israel additional diplomatic time to continue the air assault and strike the very necessary additional blows to Hamas described here.

But if Netanyahu truly halts the campaign at this point, he is setting Israel up for additional suffering in the not-too-distant future, and setting himself up for a domestic political crash. Israelis are not dense, and don't want this campaign to end merely in a draw with the Hamas.

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