



PERSPECTIVES

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The Gaza Border Fence Riots as an Operational Campaign

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: When it comes to defending the Gaza border against the physical threat, the responsibility of the Chief of Staff and the commander of Southern Command is clear-cut and well fulfilled. That, however, does not constitute a sufficient response to Hamas's effort to turn the border fence events into a strategic achievement.

Jews have known existential anxiety for generations, and the potential for existential danger has become the main criterion by which Israeli leaders tend to assess threats – including the extent to which they are strategic. Based on this criterion, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin determined, with the support of security experts, that terrorism does not constitute an existential threat.

Indeed, when a ground offensive by regular armies forms the benchmark for an existential threat, the dangers posed by terrorism – let alone by the events currently occurring along the Gaza border – are not seen as existential. But Hamas is using these events as a springboard for a strategic achievement that could have major consequences.

A strategic threat requires a strategic response, one that entails preparations for a multidimensional campaign that is waged at the national level with the state of Israel's full resources and capabilities. A strategic response of this kind must address four basic aspects of the situation:

- **Identifying the change in the reality and internalizing new trends.** The events along the fence constitute a new operational campaign against Israel that Hamas is conducting directly and in a centralized manner. In the public sphere, the campaign, with its well-crafted stage set, is presented as an unarmed civil revolt. At the covert level, however, it is

fully orchestrated by Hamas making sophisticated use of the tools of the new warfare with a view to influencing three arenas of psychological perception: the Palestinian, the Israeli, and the international.

With impressive professional skill and in coordination with global networks including BDS elements, a special effort is also being made to stream the events into the social networks. As a first stage of strategic assessment, the change must be identified as a new kind of campaign, most significantly its branding as the “March of Return.” For while Hamas has never accepted the two-state solution underpinning the Oslo process, the explicit branding of the campaign as an effort at destroying Israel – which is the real meaning of the “return” slogan in Palestinian and Arab discourse – without this evoking any international opposition requires the Israeli leadership to intensively discuss an effective counterstrategy.

- **Conceptualizing the new situation and crafting an overall, well-formed theoretical approach.** In order to contend with criticisms of the IDF’s actions on the Israeli far left, and Western public opinion more generally, a theoretical foundation tailored to the challenges of the new war must be devised. Over the past decade, the use of civilians as an operational stratagem has assumed a major role in conflict zones. For instance, the Russian government is using local separatists from the civilian population to spearhead the warfare in the Ukrainian region of Donetsk. Similarly, Beijing is making use of thousands of civilian fishing boats in its efforts to extend its sovereignty over the South China Sea. The combined use of civilians at the overt level and of the military system at the covert level, in a supportive secondary effort, is what has given this phenomenon its elusive characteristics. In the West, this is described as “hybrid warfare.” Russian military thinking, which sees an inherent advantage in the ambiguity stemming from combining civilians and soldiers, refers to this phenomenon as the “warfare of the new generation.”

In unprecedented fashion, the Russian authorities gave public exposure to a lecture presented by Chief of Staff Valery Gerasimov at the Russian Academy of Military Sciences in January 2013. Now known in the military world as the “Gerasimov doctrine,” the lecture articulated a *modus operandi* that the Russians have employed for some time, as evident in the recent campaigns in Georgia (2008), Crimea, and Ukraine. Those campaigns made deliberate and effective use of the combination of military force and civilian activity. In the fighting in Georgia, for example, armored forces were able to enter the north of the country

thanks to the efforts of Russian-oriented Georgian-Abkhaz civilians, who, in a preparatory move, seized the tunnels and bridges of the expressway that leads to the capital, Tbilisi.

Against this backdrop, the images arriving from the confrontation along the Gaza fence need not be interpreted as IDF units suppressing civilian protests but as IDF forces protecting the kindergartens and civilians of the Nahal Oz and Kerem Shalom kibbutzim, which are about 200 meters from the fence and under threat from a terror organization in civilian guise.

This revised theoretical foundation will help rebut, from a new perspective, the false accusations directed at IDF soldiers. It will explain, for example, the potential threat posed to Israeli civilians in border communities by seemingly unarmed violent protesters and how this threat justifies the rules of engagement. It will elucidate why there is no alternative to the use of sniper fire and why nonlethal weapons and standard means of dispersing civilian demonstrations are not applicable to the circumstances of this threat.

- **Adapting the organizational structure to change.** A new challenge calls for reassessing the organizational structure's compatibility with the changing reality. Israel made such a reassessment when preparing for the unilateral disengagement from Gaza in the summer of 2005. Along with organizing units and combined command systems for the IDF and the Israel Police, task-specific administrations were set up in government ministries to address the wide range of issues beyond the military effort. Likewise, the ongoing campaign along the Gaza fence mandates a special organizational response at the national level.

While the responsibility of the Chief of Staff and the commander of Southern Command is clear-cut and ably fulfilled, the organizational approach must be adapted to the demands of the psychological arena, with all its legal, diplomatic, and public-diplomacy aspects. The IDF Spokesperson's Unit, the Foreign Ministry, and the public-diplomacy apparatus in the Prime Minister's Office can, of course, retain responsibility for the domain of perception. Yet, as the challenge intensifies, a special new organization is required for mobilizing Israel's full range of capabilities for an effort at the national level.

- **Planning and managing the endeavor in accordance with a strategic objective.** An operation of such scope requires precise and deliberate attunement with the strategic purpose, the suitability of which must be constantly reassessed as the campaign develops. This will also

necessitate a new plan to alleviate humanitarian distress in the Gaza Strip as well as a new political approach, one that views Gaza as a *de facto* state and strives, in keeping with Israeli interests, to bolster its status as an independent political entity that is separate from the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah.

To the best of my knowledge, preparations at the national level for the required strategic endeavor – in the above four areas – have yet to be conducted. In light of the new challenge posed by Hamas, which will likely escalate in the coming weeks, one cannot overstate the urgency of such preparations.

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