



PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

Can Israel Defeat Hamas Without Toppling It?

by Yaakov Lappin

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,093, February 21, 2019

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: So far, Israel's objectives in armed conflicts with Hamas have been limited so as to avoid the need to reoccupy Gaza or to send it down the "Somalia model" path of chaos. But there might be a third option.

Despite its radical Islamist ideology and long-term commitment to Israel's destruction, Hamas in the Gaza Strip is, for now, avoiding high intensity armed conflict.

Hamas's leader, Yihye Sinwar, has expressed an awareness of the futility of a new war with Israel at this time. Instead, he is focused on other goals: ending the organization's regional isolation, strengthening its iron grip on Gaza, and avoiding an economic meltdown in the Strip, which could endanger its regime.

Hamas is relying on low intensity pressure tactics, such as weekly border rioting, to promote these goals.

It is also actively trying to set up terrorism cells throughout the West Bank and plot mass casualty attacks, which the Shin Bet intelligence agency prevents to a very large degree. Hamas's object is to weaken its arch West Bank rival, the Palestinian Authority (PA), and promote the cause of jihadist violence against Israel – and do all this without leading a trail of fire back to Gaza.

The Gaza-Israel border violence that Hamas has fomented for nearly a year represents a calculated high-risk approach. It is designed to apply pressure on Jerusalem and Cairo to ease security restrictions on Gaza without allowing the situation to deteriorate into a new war.

Hamas's attempts to reconcile with the PA in Ramallah, which holds the key to budget allocations for Gaza, have failed, and the group is now engaging with Israel and Egypt to rescue Gaza's economy.

A shared Israeli-Hamas interest in preventing an economic collapse of Gaza has led to regular injections of Qatari cash, a development that has politically damaged PM Benjamin Netanyahu in Israel. It has also led to some criticism of Hamas by Gazans, who ask whether the border violence and the casualties it causes are all just for the sake of Qatari money.

Throughout this time, Hamas, together with Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), the second-largest armed faction in Gaza, has been embarked on an ambitious military build-up program involving the domestic production of some 20,000 surface-to-surface rockets, the digging of a network of combat tunnels crisscrossing Gaza, and intensive war training for armed Gazan battalions.

The result is an inherently unstable Gazan arena that could rapidly shift from low-level confrontation to high-intensity armed conflict, sparked by any number of localized tactical incidents.

Now is therefore the crucial time for Israel to consider the end objective of any future armed conflict in Gaza, despite the lack of any will on Jerusalem's part to enter into one.

In recent years, the Israel Defense Force's (IDF) Southern Command, which is responsible for much of the war planning for Gaza, identified a long-term truce as the best of bad options for Israel.

This is based on the understanding that an Israeli invasion of Gaza and subsequent destruction of the Hamas regime would leave Israel in the unenviable position of being directly in charge of some two million mostly hostile Gazans. This could lead to an open-ended and draining military occupation.

It would be extremely difficult to find alternative rulers for Gaza, with the Palestinian Authority likely unwilling or unable to "ride into Gaza on Israeli tanks" and assume a governing role in the aftermath of a war. The PA would risk its legitimacy and be exposed to even harsher criticism from its Islamist rivals, who are always keen to depict it as a collaborator of Israel.

Even if the PA were willing to take over Gaza at some point, it remains unclear whether it is in fact capable of governing the Strip, as the 2007 Hamas armed coup already demonstrated.

As a result, any postwar Israeli presence in Gaza could drag on for years, and prove costly in both blood and treasure. Alternatively, Israel could demolish the Hamas regime and leave Gaza, putting it on a fast track to a “Somalia model” of anarchy and violence.

Under that scenario, no clear ruling party would emerge to fill the vacuum in post-Hamas Gaza. Multiple jihadist armed gangs that lack a central ruling structure would appear, and Israel would be unable to project its military might to any single “return address” in Gaza. This would result in a loss of Israel's deterrent force on Gaza to keep the region calm. This scenario would be considerably worse than the current status quo.

But a third option, in between the options of leaving Gaza as it is and toppling Hamas in a future war, may exist.

Under this third scenario, the IDF would decimate Hamas's military wing in any future conflict, but leave its political wing and police force in place. This would enable a rapid Israeli exit after a war, but avoid a Somalia-like fate for Gaza with its destructive implications for both Israelis and Gazans.

The question of whether Israel has the option of leaving Hamas's police force and civilian government administration in place in a future war rests largely on how such entities are defined.

On the one hand, Hamas's police force is an intrinsic support system for Gaza's terrorist-guerilla forces. On the other, the police and domestic security units play a genuine role in keeping order in Hamastan. Such forces have been used to repress ISIS-affiliated cells that challenge Hamas's rule.

In 2008, in response to an onslaught of Hamas rockets, Israel launched Operation Cast Lead with a surprise air attack. Among the over 100 targets that it destroyed, the Israel Air Force (IAF) bombed 24 Hamas police stations, including Gaza City Police headquarters, where a cadet graduation ceremony was underway. An estimated 40 people, including several dozen police cadets, were killed.

Clearly, in that conflict, Israel identified the Hamas police force as an intrinsic part of the Hamas regime's terrorist assets and a legitimate enemy target.

Eleven years later, this thinking may have changed somewhat. The reason is due not to any change in the close ties between the domestic armed units of Gaza and the Hamas military wing, but rather, to the fact that Hamas's ability to continue to rule Gaza after a future war might be in Israel's interest. Compared to the alternative scenarios of indefinite occupation or the “Somalia scenario,” a weakened Hamas might be the best and most realistic option.

To be sure, Hamas continues to use its police force to support its terrorist-guerilla army. The organization uses the Gazan naval police, for example, as a cover for its build-up of naval commando attack cells. For this reason, Israel has repeatedly struck naval police sites in Gaza, including in May of last year during an escalation.

But if the option of launching a powerful future offensive in response to a sudden escalation is to include the possibility of a rapid Israeli exit, a substantial part of Hamas's ability to police and administer Gaza may need to be kept intact.

The IDF's official strategy calls for any future high intensity war to be based on a "rapid, deadly ground offensive towards targets perceived by the enemy as being of value." It also calls for overwhelming firepower in support of such a maneuver, largely based on airpower and guided by high-quality intelligence.

If Israel focuses these offensive capabilities on the Izz-ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, but not on the rest of the Hamas regime, it might be possible for Jerusalem to go beyond the objectives of past operations – which stopped at the goal of deterring Hamas and securing a period of calm for the South. It could significantly degrade Hamas's military wing and still leave a Hamas version of the PA behind – a civilian government and domestic security forces. This could help Israel avoid the trap of getting "stuck in the Gazan mud."

It remains to be seen whether the Israeli defense establishment and cabinet will adopt such an offensive plan in any future conflict.

This option would leave the door open for Hamas's military wing to eventually rebuild itself, though this could take many years if sufficient damage is inflicted on its core command structure and armed fighting capability.

Hamas, for its part, is keen to preserve both its "government project" and its armed wing, and has pursued brinksmanship with Israel based on the understanding that Jerusalem is deterred by the idea of toppling the Islamist regime.

Placing a credible threat on just the military wing could go some way towards replenishing Israeli deterrence.

Yaakov Lappin is a Research Associate at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies. He specializes in Israel's defense establishment, military affairs, and the Middle Eastern strategic environment.