



## PERSPECTIVES

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# Implications for Israel of the Joint Terrorist Military Exercise in the Gaza Strip

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** The first joint military exercise of the Gaza terrorist organizations was a milestone for Hamas, which wishes to unite these organizations in order to strengthen its control over the Strip as well as its “ambiguity strategy” vis-à-vis Israel. The exercise has implications for Israel at both the strategic and the operational levels as it prepares for a possible conflagration in Gaza.

The large military exercise held on December 29, 2020 in the Gaza Strip—the first to involve all the terrorist organizations operating in the Strip under the rubric of a “Joint Operations Headquarters”—was designed to achieve several goals:

- to convey a message to the Israeli and Gazan public that the terrorist organizations in the Gaza Strip are united in dealing with security threats, whether they be from Israel or from internal opposition to the Hamas regime
- to allow Hamas and the terrorist organizations to prepare for a military campaign against Israel, which will supposedly be led by the “Joint Operations Headquarters”
- to signal to Israel and the US the undesirability of striking Iranian targets before the end of President Trump’s term in office.

The message Hamas sought to convey regarding the unity of the terrorist organizations is highly important to the organization. Hamas needs to present a united front and the impression of consensus for the Gaza public—especially in light of the coronavirus pandemic, which is challenging

Hamas on the public health and economic fronts. The military unity of the Hamas-led terrorist groups indicates that the organization enjoys broad popular support and the “street” should rule out the possibility of challenging the regime, as happened several times in recent years. At the same time, Hamas wants to make clear to Israel that it doesn’t have absolute control over the other terrorist groups in the Strip, notably rocket attacks by “recalcitrant organizations” that do not answer to Hamas.

The latter point is part of Hamas’s ambiguity strategy. The argument that some attacks against Israeli targets are carried out by non-Hamas organizations is meant to encourage Israel to reduce the number and severity of retaliatory attacks it conducts against Hamas targets in response to such strikes.

For Islamic Jihad, which is identified with Iran, it is important that Israel’s divide-and-rule strategy in the Gaza Strip be disrupted. This strategy was seen in action during the last two rounds of fighting in the Strip, in November 2019 and February 2020, when Israel focused on attacking Islamic Jihad targets and left Hamas targets alone. Hamas took the hint and did not intervene during these rounds of conflict. In taking this approach, Israel tried to undermine the unity of ranks in the Gaza Strip and cause a rift between Hamas and Islamic Jihad. For this reason, the recent joint military exercise was a significant and even vital step for Islamic Jihad.

The need to present a united front was reflected in Hamas’s feverish creation, dissemination, and marketing of media messages for public consumption in both Israel and the Gaza Strip before and during the exercise. The name given to the exercise, *Ar-Rukn ash-Shadid* (Strong Pillar), was meant to express unity among the ranks. Hamas circulated guidelines to journalists including a call for widespread dissemination of photos and videos of the exercise across all media platforms including social media, again as a means of pushing the message of organizational unity.

Even before the exercise, the “Joint Operations Headquarters” allowed photos and promotional videos to be taken and published showing the organizations, units, and weapons that were going to take part. This was remarkable, as Hamas rarely allows dozens of journalists, photographers, and media people to come to its areas and document what they see. At the beginning of the exercise, a spokesman for the Hamas military wing held a well-publicized press conference of which many photos and videos were circulated in the Arab media and on social media. At the end of the exercise, children and teenagers were brought to the training area to take selfies of themselves standing on the models of Israeli tanks that had been used as targets during the exercise.

Beyond the public relations dimension, the joint exercise had a practical purpose: to enable Hamas and the terrorist organizations in the Gaza Strip to prepare and train for a possible military campaign against Israel while improving positions and making adjustments at the inter-organizational level.

The exercise included launching rockets toward the sea to test launch continuity, as well as conducting attacks by landing on shore using motorboats and divers from the naval commando force. In addition, there were rehearsals of land maneuvers, ambushes of military vehicles, and abductions of Israeli soldiers. A mock Israeli invasion of Gaza was thwarted through a powerful artillery barrage accompanied by rapid deployment of ground forces, sniper fire, and attack by unmanned aerial vehicles. The exercise also included efforts by civil defense forces to rescue civilians from rubble, extinguish fires, stop leaks, and control the spread of hazardous materials. It is likely that Hamas also practiced fighting underground, though these operations were not filmed for security reasons.

Hamas did not display any new weapons or capabilities during the exercise. In the past, it has used naval commandos, drones, and special force raids to attack Israeli territory, including from underground tunnels, not to mention sustained long-range rocket/missile fire. Though new materiel was not put on display, Hamas and the other terrorist organizations in Gaza are constantly improving and refining their operational capabilities and weapons, including the ranges, accuracy, and firepower of their rockets.

While Hamas probably does wish to join forces with other terrorist organizations and prepare for a future military campaign against Israel, the idea for the joint exercise might not have originated in Gaza. It was reported by Palestinian sources in Gaza that it was Tehran that asked Hamas and Islamic Jihad to organize the exercise in order to send a message to Israel and the US that the Tehran-led "Axis of Resistance" is alive and well.

Evidence of Iranian involvement was seen in the displaying by Hamas of numerous posters of Qassem Soleimani, who was killed in a US air strike in January 2020, as well as of Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah. Nasrallah somewhat surprisingly alluded to the exercise a day before its occurrence as "an important step and a show of force that frightens the Israeli enemy."

For Israel, the joint exercise poses a multidimensional threat. The IDF must prepare for a military campaign in which it will operate at high intensity across a variety of dimensions simultaneously: in the air, near the ground (with drones), on land, at sea, in cyberspace, and in underground tunnels. The IDF should also prepare for the possibility of wider combat cooperation

among the Gaza terrorist organizations, which has so far been limited mainly to joint rocket launches. The joint exercise may herald joint operational combat in other areas and in multiple dimensions. The IDF will have to make adjustments at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels in terms of both its arms and its preparation for multi-dimensional combat and multi-arm maneuvering.

In addition, Israel must continue to send deterrent messages to Hamas and Islamic Jihad to keep the next campaign as far away as possible. This could include targeted killings of senior members of these organizations as well as indications of readiness to engage in land maneuvers deep inside the Gaza Strip. The IDF must convey that it has both the military capabilities and the resolve for a swift and decisive all-out confrontation that will comprehensively rout the terrorist groups in Gaza.

On the same day the joint terrorist exercise was held in Gaza, the IDF conducted its own military exercise in the southern region. And while the IDF claimed the exercise was simply part of its 2020 training program, one wonders at the coincidence of the two opposing exercises being conducted simultaneously.

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