



## PERSPECTIVES

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# Did the Gaza Operation Achieve Its Political Goal?

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Operation Guardian of the Walls was supposed to achieve the political goal of “restoring quiet and security to Israel.” Despite the IDF’s spectacular exploits and extensive destruction of targets, it appears that control over the length of the quiet and the quality of Israel’s security will remain in Hamas’s hands, just as it was before the operation.

According to PM Benjamin Netanyahu, the political goal of Operation Guardian of the Walls was “to restore quiet and security to Israel.” This was also the political goal of the Sinai (1956), Peace for Galilee (1982), Defensive Shield (2002), and Protective Edge (2014) operations, as well as the Second Lebanon War (2006).

In the Sinai, Peace for Galilee, and Defensive Shield campaigns, the IDF’s mission was defined as “removing the threat.” The achievement of that goal entailed creating an operational reality that prevented the threat from reemerging and that left the key to long-term quiet and security in Israel’s hands.

Prior to the Second Lebanon War, the IDF replaced its traditional combat doctrine, which was designed to defeat the enemy, with an alternate doctrine whereby Israel compels the enemy to stop fighting as a result of deterrence but does not degrade or destroy its resources. In that vein, in the Second Lebanon War the IDF’s mission was to deter Hezbollah by surprising it with an overwhelming response to provocation, delivered via breathtaking technological means. Hezbollah was indeed surprised, but because it was not defeated it was not deterred, and Israel found itself in a difficult and lengthy (34-day) war the duration of which was dictated by the enemy. The IDF did not come out of the war with strong military cards enabling Israel to control

the threat, which remained as it was and indeed has since grown to monstrous proportions. Two official committees of inquiry set up in the wake of the war (Winograd and Shomron) came to the conclusion that the IDF needed to shelve the deterrence doctrine and return to its traditional doctrine of victory.

Though the IDF committed itself to abandoning the deterrence doctrine with its elusive goals, the objective of Operation Protective Edge in 2014 remained vague: to “teach the enemy a lesson” and deter it from renewing fire at Israel by inflicting harsh blows and attacking its symbols, including strikes on its leaders. But just as in 2006, the threat was not removed, and key military objectives—objectives that could have prevented the renewal and intensification of a threat that turned the lives of southern Israel’s residents into Russian roulette—were not achieved.

Though we don’t know what Chief of Staff Kochavi’s precise definition of the IDF’s objectives in Operation Guardian of the Walls actually was, it appears from public allusions to it by former security officials, journalists, and even the IDF’s spokesperson and commanders as “dealing harsh blows that would deter the enemy,” and that the aim was once again “to remove the threat” as in the victory doctrine. But unlike the doctrine of rapid and simultaneous victory that was implemented last century, “victory” in Guardian of the Walls entailed destroying aspects of the threat in a linear and gradual manner.

The problem with a gradual victory of that kind is that the fighting drags on and there is no way to anticipate how long the campaign will last. This contradicts a basic premise of Israel’s national-security concept: that Israel always has a limited diplomatic time frame at its disposal (and today, with the power of social media, a limited public opinion time frame as well).

This approach also contradicts the traditional premise that when engaged in a conflict, the IDF must be prepared to rapidly achieve two goals: neutralizing the aspect of the threat that poses the greatest danger to Israel; and conquering crucial, however limited, territory as rapidly as possible. In that way Israel gains either a strong card for a diplomatic settlement that will preclude the return of the threat or the requisite operational control to prevent its return if no diplomatic settlement is reached.

In Operation Guardian of the Walls, the IDF scored many successes. Defensively, it thwarted attempts at a ground infiltration from Gaza into Israel. Offensively, it destroyed a great many components of the threat—some with direct and immediate significance for achieving quiet and security (launchers, rockets, weapons storehouses, tunnels, terrorists, key

commanders), some with significance that is more long-term or that only concerns perceptions and morale.

And yet, lamentably, despite dramatic and unprecedented success in locating, intercepting, and destroying a huge quantity of targets, the operation ended without Israel having achieved the two military objectives that are essential to true quiet and security:

- the total or near-total destruction of the rockets/missiles arsenal—the aspect of the threat that poses the greatest danger to southern and central Israel; and
- the seizure of territory whose control by the IDF would ensure, at a high level of certainty, that the threat will not be reconstituted.

And so yet another military campaign, while rich in accomplishments, came to an end without an “overwhelming, clear, and unequivocal military victory” that would ensure the political outcome of “restoring quiet and security to Israel.” As was the case with its predecessors, by the end of the operation quiet and security were still dependent on chance and fate—that is, on the “deterrence” that the operation was supposed to instill in Hamas.

In the military profession, however, the efficacy of deterrence, while a significant factor, can never be assessed and therefore should not be given any weight. Yitzhak Rabin considered it nonsense, and treated it as such in his military and political capacities.

The IDF and its commanders now have two basic responsibilities:

- to complete as rapidly as possible the “Kochavi Revolution,” which enabled the spectacular achievements of Operation Guardian of the Walls, while adding the crucial component of winning the next campaign by rapidly and simultaneously neutralizing the enemy’s capabilities across the different arenas; and
- to erase from the IDF’s mentality and professional language all traces of the doctrine of “victory through deterrence” to which it became addicted over past decades.

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