



## PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

# Operation Guardian of the Walls: Tactical Victory, Strategic Defeat

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BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 2,048, May 25, 2021

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Israel ended the war in Gaza with impressive tactical achievements but in a position of great strategic inferiority. The outcome recalls America's quantitative achievements in the Vietnam War alongside its strategic defeat in that conflict.**

After 11 days of fighting, the fourth Israel-Hamas war since the Islamist terror organization took over the Gaza Strip in 2007 came to an end. Like its predecessors, the war concluded without a clear victory. The impression, however, is that this conflict differed completely from the previous rounds of fighting in terms of the contrasting language and modes of thinking of Hamas and Israel, which reflected a wide conceptual disparity.

Whereas Israel's thinking during the fighting displayed a tactical-quantitative logic, Hamas's thinking was strategic-qualitative. This was clearly evident in Israel's domestic discourse, which focused on quantitative achievements of the campaign such as number of targets attacked, number of Hamas terrorists killed, quantity of rockets launched or destroyed, number of tunnels pulverized, number of multistory buildings leveled, and so on. From that standpoint, the nature of the campaign—which consisted primarily of airstrikes—reinforced the Israeli conception, which centered on hopes to achieve as many objectives as possible by attacking “targets.”

In this regard the IDF indeed performed well. The campaign was well conducted, with coordination between the IDF and the Shabak (Israel Security Agency). Even the political echelon, which is politically divided against itself, managed to maintain harmony and laudable cooperation.

Hamas was undoubtedly hit hard and extensively from a military standpoint—but therein lies the catch. Not only did its tactical-quantitative logic prevent Israel from reaching a clear-cut, indisputable military outcome, but Hamas used a completely different logic that focused on systemic strategic objectives.

From that perspective, Hamas had greater success than expected. It not only initiated the campaign by firing rockets at Israel's capital on the Jerusalem Day holiday and thereby surprising Israeli political and military decision-makers (as some senior defense officials admitted), but was also able to create ripple effects of the war beyond the borders of Gaza. The discord that emerged in Jewish-Arab relations in Israel, the riots in mixed cities, and the agitation in the West Bank were side effects of the war in Gaza.

For the first time, Hamas succeeded in enticing the whole Palestinian body politic (in Gaza, the West Bank, and within Israel) into an outburst of terror and violence. It thus undermined a key Israeli approach, one that has succeeded for an appreciable period: to drive a wedge between the Palestinian populations of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

Moreover, Hamas waged its campaign from a broad regional and international perspective. Unlike in previous rounds, where the "blockade" on Gaza was made central to the fighting and its objectives, in this one Hamas turned Jerusalem into the symbolic focus. Hamas thereby took the lead of the regional terror and "resistance" camp—even at the expense of Hezbollah, which had to acquiesce to missile launches at Israel from Lebanese territory by "rebellious" Palestinian factions (which could become an ongoing phenomenon).

In this latest campaign, Hamas set the agenda. The conflict in Gaza was no longer a local "round of fighting" with Israel but an aspect, even a cornerstone, of a much larger confrontation between two regional schools.

The first is the economic-pragmatic school of the "minds," in which Israel has taken the lead alongside wealthy and risk-averse states of the region. This school espouses a politics of promoting an economic agenda and has backed the Abraham Accords, as well as the Mansour Abbas phenomenon. It was also the rationale behind the Trump administration's Deal of the Century.

The second is the "hearts" school of the "resistance camp," which espouses old school identity politics based on utopian and absolute visions that prioritize the future over the present. While during the past decade, the pragmatic school gained a distinct advantage in the region under the tutelage

of the US, the Gaza campaign appears to have challenged it, enabled by three factors:

1. A change in US administration, as President Biden and his progressive entourage are abandoning his predecessor's Middle East policy
2. The weakness of the Israeli political system and particularly of Netanyahu, who was perceived as playing a key strategic role of deterrence
3. The "resistance camp's" assessment of the weakness of the West (including Israel) amid its internal disarray during the COVID-19 crisis.

The past decade was marked by relative security stability in the region, the weakness of the resistance camp, and the declining salience of the Palestinian question. The conflict in Gaza altered this reality and boosted the proponents of identity politics within Gaza, among Israeli Arabs, and among West Bank Palestinians. Rather than simply another tactical round between the two sides, the latest Gaza confrontation was a strategic clash between different schools, approaches, worldviews, and camps.

From that standpoint, Israel had an extraordinary opportunity to turn Gaza and Hamas into a kind of lesson both regionally and internationally, thereby restoring the previous equilibrium and reestablishing the pragmatic-economic agenda. To do so, however, would have required a revision of the IDF's strategy toward Gaza and a different set of operational objectives, resulting in a campaign designed to demolish the foundations of Hamas's military power. That would have entailed abandoning the strategy of an aerial campaign in favor of one combining airstrikes and a ground maneuver. But it appears that the gap in language between Israel's tactical-quantitative approach and Hamas's strategic-qualitative one reflected Israel's difficulty in understanding the nature and unique significance of this latest Gaza conflict in relation to its predecessors, and in appreciating the wider context in which it was waged.

Instead, Israel used the same operational military logic it employed in previous rounds, viewing the warfare as another of its chronic clashes with the Gaza terror organizations. Accordingly, it ended the operation with impressive tactical achievements but in a position of great strategic inferiority—so great that it recalls America's quantitative achievements alongside its strategic defeat in the Vietnam War (1959-1975). Here there are clear implications for Middle Eastern politics in almost every conceivable regard.

The "hearts" now have the upper hand. Hamas was able to make itself an important strategic actor beyond the Palestinian arena. It managed to

undermine the economic-pragmatic paradigm of the Deal of the Century, spark conflict between Jews and Arabs in Israel, and give the region's terror groups good reason to keep confronting Israel.

This is not good news for the "minds" and those in the Middle East who love life. Any effort to counteract this emerging trend requires, first and foremost, a cognitive internalization of the true significance of the latest war, and particularly its real outcomes. The sooner the better.

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