



## Lessons of the Gaza War

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** The IDF's defensive achievements against Hamas in the most recent war were groundbreaking. Yet for all its operational superiority, it will have a hard time defending Israel within the 1967 borders, especially in the event of a multi-arena conflict.

During the recent war in Gaza, Israel was exposed for the first time to the strategy of Qassem Soleimani: encirclement in a ring of fire on all fronts, including the domestic one. This time the Gaza arena, which erupts into war from time to time, turned the al-Aqsa Mosque and Jerusalem into a new focal point, thereby igniting nationwide riots by Israeli Arabs.

In his speech after the war, Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh said, "The campaign opened a door to new horizons." Fortunately, these new horizons—and the full threat they represent—are yet to become a reality. Now that there is a ceasefire, Israel has the opportunity to assess them.

What was surprising in this war? In terms of operational preparedness, the IDF was ready to fight. At the same time, IDF intelligence admits there was a measure of surprise in the fact that Hamas initiated this round. The surprise lay in the new geopolitical framework, with Hamas centering the campaign on the issue of Jerusalem.

In the battles of the previous century, including the Six-Day War and the Yom Kippur War, the launching of a war required a prior deployment by the enemy with the attendant warning signs of the enemy's intent. When Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser decided in May 1967 to move his forces into Sinai, the entry to Sinai and the process of deploying the Egyptian forces provided Israel with a warning period. Likewise, in the lead-up to the Yom Kippur War, there were overt signs of preparation for war—though in that case, unfortunately, IDF intelligence chose to ignore them. Since that time, intelligence assessment has relied on close

and systematic monitoring of telltale signs. It is here that Hamas's potential to achieve surprise—and, even more so, Hezbollah's—has brought about an essential change.

Unlike traditional military organizations, Hamas and Hezbollah employ a logic that limits preparation time for a campaign. Most of their rockets and missiles are already routinely deployed at their launching pads. The same is true for a considerable part of their forces, who are primarily locals. The Shuja'iya and Jebaliya battalions, for example, are manned by residents of those neighborhoods, from fighters all the way up to battalion commanders. This makes the transition from routine to emergency conditions very rapid and allows IDF intelligence only a brief warning.

Even under routine conditions, substantial parts of enemy combat forces are deployed at all times in a state of constant preparedness for action. The short time needed by the enemy to initiate hostilities, from the moment the leadership makes the decision to the operation itself, means surprise salvos of fire are always a possibility. This change challenges the basic assumptions of Ben-Gurion's security concept, a cornerstone of which was dependence on a warning period.

The shortening of warning time requires Israel to revise its security concept. Chief of Staff Aviv Kochavi, in the new plan he formulated for the IDF's operational approach, has indeed made changes to the traditional approach to defense. Also, under previous Chief of Staff Gadi Eisenkot, resources were invested in upgrading defense, including the underground concrete wall around the Gaza Strip.

The IDF's defensive achievements against Hamas in the latest round were ground-breaking and should by no means be taken lightly. Also of note were the Israeli navy's achievements in thwarting every offensive move by Hamas's navy, the air force's achievements in shooting down Hamas drones—including an explosive drone that was directed at the Tamar gas rig, and defensive achievements at the Gaza border that blocked the infiltration of Hamas commando teams. Also laudable were the efforts to counteract rocket fire and the performance of the Iron Dome batteries, which can be added to the achievements in the defensive domain.

More broadly, the threat Hamas posed through the rocket firepower it directed at Israeli cities should set off warning bells about a possible Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank. A Palestinian state on the 1967 borders will not be demilitarized and will have the capacity to become a far greater threat than the Gaza Strip. The magnitude of the self-production of weapons under Hamas and Islamic Jihad reveals the hollowness of the demilitarization delusion. Most of that self-production was carried out with civilian machinery and raw materials. There is no way to prevent a state from possessing computerized lathe machines, iron pipes, or phosphates. The fact that, at present, there is no rocket production in the

Palestinian cities and refugee camps of the West Bank stems entirely from the monitoring and prevention made possible by the IDF forces and the presence of Israeli civilian communities deep inside the territory.

Central Command's success during this round in containing popular terror activity and violence in the West Bank areas under its aegis demonstrates that the demand for a continued Israeli presence in those areas is justified, both tactically and generally. When one compares the resources and efforts required to secure Israel's coastal plain, which are built around IDF activity in the West Bank and the support of the Israeli communities there, to what the defense establishment has to invest in the Gaza Strip, it becomes clear that the existing situation in the West Bank is more effective, economical, and suitable.

Those calling for further withdrawals, entailing the uprooting of communities and a retreat to the separation-fence line, base themselves on two premises:

- A withdrawal to the 1967 lines with minor adjustments will bring an end to the "occupation" and afford Israel international legitimacy and support for a military operation if its security is undermined by the Palestinian state.
- The IDF, with its perpetual superiority, can remove any security threat in a short time and at a reasonable price.

The magnitude of the threat facing Israel from Gaza, alongside hostile public opinion in Western countries (recall that Israeli proponents of the 2005 unilateral disengagement from Gaza promised that the international community would back any Israeli military response to terror attacks from the Strip, a result that never materialized), casts great doubt on the validity of those premises.

For that matter, President Biden's support for Israel's right to defend itself could not be taken for granted, and it is likely that a price will have to be paid for the US backing PM Netanyahu received for 10 days of warfare. The US administration, which is committed to promoting the two-state solution, was well aware that failing to support Israel while it was under a terror onslaught from Gaza would make it difficult to demand Israel's agreement to a future West Bank withdrawal. Still, Israel was prevented by the administration from sustaining its offensive so as to bring Hamas to its knees.

The events of the past weeks, which showed the limitations of the IDF's power in the event of a multi-arena war (including the domestic one), a prospect for which the potential is growing, indicate that additional withdrawals would pose an existential danger to Israel. With all the IDF's operational superiority, if it has to

fight in the northern arena as well, it will be unable to defend the narrow coastal strip from the pre-1967 border.

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