



After the War, Israeli Military Governance Might Be Temporarily Required in Gaza

by Dr. (Lt. Col.) Shaul Bartal

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Infiltrations of armed militants for the purpose of killing and looting are nothing new in the troubled history of the Gaza Strip. The attack by Hamas on October 7, 2023, led to the deaths of approximately 1,200 people (360 members of the security forces and the rest civilians, almost all of them Israeli). Hamas also abducted approximately 240 people, again almost all Israeli citizens. These atrocities are just another link in the long chain of suffering between Israel and the Gaza Strip. Only when a determined governing authority held full control over the Strip, as Egypt did from 1956 to 1967 and Israel did from 1967 to 1993, could the development of the western Negev and southern Israel thrive. Israel has spent 17 years trying to disengage from Gaza without success, and there has been round after round of fighting. Despite its economic dependence on Israel, Gaza has remained a significant security problem that only worsened over time. The Swords of Iron War could be an opportunity to change the reality in the Gaza Strip, but it might require the return of Israeli military governance until, with the help of regional and local actors and international support, a solution is found - a solution that does not merely establish temporary quiet but that ensures peace and stability in the Gaza region for all.

In 1949, following the War of Independence and the establishment of the borders in the armistice agreement signed between Israel and its neighbors, infiltrations from the Gaza Strip and the West Bank into the State of Israel began to occur on a significant scale. These infiltrations were not necessarily organized by terrorist

groups, and in many cases, they were initiated by individuals or local groups. Nonetheless, there were instances of infiltration carried out by remnants of the Arab Liberation Army supported by the Nazi-sympathizing, eliminationist Palestinian Mufti, Haj Muhammad Amin AL-Husseini, or by Muslim Brotherhood sympathizers.

Between 1949 and 1956, there were approximately 70,000 cases of infiltration. During the peak years of border conflict, from 1950 to 1953, there were around 16,000 infiltration incidents reported each year. Due to improved Israeli security measures, the number of infiltrations decreased to about 5,000 per year.

Dealing with this constant security challenge, known as "Bitash" (routine security measures), was one of the most difficult problems Israel had to contend with during this period. In response, the IDF established the Hagmar (territorial defense organization), created the role of the Rabash (Regional Officer for Civilian Defense), and set up the Border Guard as a law enforcement arm responsible for safeguarding the state's borders.

Despite Israel's extensive development of settlement defenses, infiltrators continued to penetrate settlements, either for theft or for the purposes of vengeance and harm. In his research on Israel's border wars during these years, Benny Morris extensively describes in detail the infiltration activities that led to the loss of 317 Jewish lives due to the actions of these infiltrators, with the majority of them coming from the Gaza Strip (22 killed in 1949, 19 in 1950, 48 in 1951, 42 in 1952, 44 in 1953, 33 in 1954, and 54 in 1956).

At that time, as is the case today, the victims of infiltrations by Palestinian militants from the Gaza Strip lived in settlements near the border, such as Nahal Oz, Be'eri, Nirim, and Netiv HaAsara. At times, the infiltrators even penetrated deeper into Israel, reaching places like Yehud, Rishon LeZion, Ashkelon, and Ashdod.

At this time, the defensive measures taken were not sufficient, and Israel turned to offensive initiatives. Unit 101 was established and operated briefly before merging into the Paratroopers Brigade, but it had a significant impact on shaping military doctrine. During this period, Egypt controlled the Gaza Strip and was responsible for maintaining the border. Infiltration was considered a violation of the armistice agreement signed between Israel and Egypt. Both Jordan and Egypt struggled to adhere to the agreements requiring them to maintain the armistice lines.

On February 28, 1955, Israeli forces entered the Gaza Strip in what became known as "Operation Black Arrow." From a military perspective, this operation was a success. The IDF entered the heart of Gaza, destroyed Egyptian military headquarters, and killed 37 Egyptian soldiers and one civilian. The Israeli force lost eight soldiers, and 13 were wounded.

The operation sparked outrage in Egypt and other Arab countries. In the Gaza Strip, large-scale protests were held by local residents who called for an intifada and requested weapons to defend themselves. Palestinian historian Hussein Abu Naml describes the Palestinian demands of the Egyptian leadership, including the establishment of a Palestinian national guard in the Gaza Strip that would be authorized and trained by the army to carry out military operations inside the State of Israel.

Egypt's president, Gamal Abdel Nasser, considered the Israeli action an affront to his honor and that of the Egyptian military, which had failed to protect the residents of the Gaza Strip. He believed it allowed Israel to target its bases from deep within the Gaza Strip. From Egypt's perspective, this was one provocation too many, leading Egypt to adopt a tactic similar to what Hamas employs today: conducting large-scale incursions by militants who would infiltrate settlements in the Gaza envelope and target the civilian population.

In response to the demands of the population, as reflected in the massive protests following the Gaza operation, the Egyptians established a defense system in the form of a Palestinian National Guard (al-Haras al-Watani). It had 500 fighters at its peak, and they were trained and equipped by the Egyptian military. Its primary purpose was to defend the Gaza Strip. Later, the organization was redefined as a Palestinian battalion within the Egyptian army.

From among those recruited for the National Guard, a unique commando unit of select soldiers was formed, similar to Hamas's Nakhba, led by Lt. Col. Mustafa Hafez. At its largest, the unit contained about 400 fedayeen (self-sacrificers). The soldiers of this commando unit received training in sabotage, infiltration, and intelligence.

Egypt's military intelligence directed two waves of infiltration into Israel, the first in August 1955 and the second in April-May 1956. Each wave consisted of approximately 200 infiltrators who entered Israel in small groups to carry out acts of terror. Their mission was to assassinate Jews and gather intelligence. The age

range of these commandos was typically between 20 and 32, with most of them having families. They came from all segments of the population, including refugees and residents. Support for the Egyptian commando operations, as they were called in the Egyptian media at the time, came from all ends of the population.

The commandos sometimes operated independently without central communication or the ability of central command to bring them back. They often chose to hide with their relatives in the West Bank and didn't return to Gaza. The fedayeen relied on operatives and former prisoners who were familiar with the area and gathered intelligence before launching attacks on kibbutzim and moshavim, especially in southern Israel.

In a speech on Eid al-Fitr in May 1956, Nasser praised their actions and said, "You have proven that your homeland can rely on you. The spirit you have brought into the enemy must hold. The world has recognized your actions, and, more importantly, the enemy has felt the strength of your intentions against him. He has learned the extent to which you can show courage and strength." Egyptian media celebrated the fedayeen and exaggerated their numbers significantly, even reaching tens of thousands. They were defined in Arabic media reports as Egyptian commando forces, but it's worth recalling that these were Palestinians residing in the Gaza Strip who were directed by Egypt and primarily targeted civilians. This was not reflected in Arab media coverage of their actions.

The proliferation of infiltrations and Israeli retaliatory actions escalated, leading Israel to occupy the Gaza Strip on October 29, 1956 as part of Operation Kadesh (also known as the Sinai Campaign), which involved the participation of Britain and France. A significant conflict in Gaza had become inevitable due to the escalation of border tensions, Israeli retaliatory operations in the heart of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and widespread infiltration waves by infiltrators, many of whom were directed by and inspired by Egyptian intelligence. From the Israeli perspective, the goal of Operation Kadesh was to bring peace and security to the residents of the State of Israel, particularly those in the southern settlements. Moshe Dayan, who played a role in shaping Israeli policy during those years, understood that there was no alternative to war to put an end to the fedayeen's activities.

The Israeli National Guard, which was organized before the war, fought fiercely against the fedayeen to defend the Gaza Strip. The fedayeen were either captured or forced to flee and go into hiding. According to Arab sources, around a thousand Palestinians were killed during the Gaza Strip's occupation over a period of about three months. IDF reports provide lower numbers of around two hundred Palestinian casualties, while UN estimates suggest that the number of fatalities on the Palestinian side ranged from 440 to 550. At that time, there were allegations that IDF forces committed massacres during the Gaza Strip's occupation, particularly in Khan Yunis, where there was strong resistance from Palestinian National Guard forces.

In a report to the IDF Chief of Staff's office describing the Gaza Strip's occupation, Lt. Col. Matti Peled, who later became a Member of Knesset and a left-wing activist, said that Israel's policy led to the disbandment of the fedayeen unit. Some of its members were killed while others were arrested. After Israel's withdrawal in March 1957 under strong pressure from the United States and the Soviet Union, Egypt refrained from reestablishing the fedayeen unit and adhered to the terms of the ceasefire agreements to prevent violent infiltrations into Israel.

Gaza enjoyed relative peace for 11 years. While there were occasional small incidents, they did not reach the same scale as in the 1950s. The Egyptian authorities demonstrated that when there is an assertive and decisive authority effectively governing the Gaza Strip, it is possible to provide security for the residents of Israel.

In June 1967, the Gaza Strip was once again occupied by Israel, which maintained full control over it until the signing of the Oslo Accords in the 1990s. A portion of control was transferred to the Palestinian Authority as part of the Gaza-Jericho Agreement, initially signed on May 4, 1994. Israel continued to retain control over parts of the Gaza Strip, according to interim agreements, until its disengagement in August 2005.

It's worth noting that before the establishment of the Palestinian National Authority within the framework of the Gaza-Jericho Agreement, Israel did not suffer from rocket fire into its territory from the Gaza Strip. In the period leading up to the 2005 Israeli disengagement, there were sporadic rocket attacks, primarily towards the communities of Gush Katif and nearby settlements, originating from areas under the control of the Palestinian Authority and mostly carried out by

Hamas. As of 2005, the Gaza Strip was ostensibly under the control of the Palestinian Authority, which saw itself as a quasi-independent Palestinian entity.

On January 25, 2006, Hamas was elected by a significant majority to the Palestinian Legislative Council, leading to the formation of the first Hamas government led by Ismail Haniyeh. This transformed Hamas, an organization with an Islamist extremist and antisemitic ideology, into a governing authority within the Palestinian territories.

In June 2007, Hamas violently evicted Fatah and took full control of the Gaza Strip, effectively turning it into an independent entity. It became a local Islamic emirate ruling over a population of around two million people, many of whom support the struggle against Israel, according to Palestinian surveys.

Ever since 2006, when Hamas assumed power, the Gaza Strip has not experienced peace. Numerous rounds of conflict erupted between Israel and Gaza, resulting in many casualties and significant economic losses. The most notable conflicts include Operations Cast Lead (2009), Pillar of Defense (2012), Protective Edge (2014), and Guardian of the Walls (2021), as well as smaller clashes involving Islamic Jihad.

The Gaza Strip has become a battleground between Israel and Iran's proxy groups, including Hamas and Islamic Jihad, as well as other Palestinian organizations, many of which hold anti-Western, jihadist, and Islamist ideologies derived from the Muslim Brotherhood's fundamentalist beliefs.

The Swords of Iron War imposed on Israel on October 7, 2023, could be an opportunity to bring security and calm to the western Negev communities and allow for their growth. The central conclusion that can be drawn from the historical account presented above is that in order to achieve security and tranquility for the residents of Israel, there is a need for a governing authority capable of enforcing its control. This can be inferred from the relative quiet that prevailed between 1956 and 1967 under Egyptian rule and the Israeli military rule that was in place from 1967 until the Oslo Accords.

Therefore, it is not enough to simply occupy the territory or weaken Hamas's authority. One must consider the day after the end of the war. The alternatives proposed for governance in Gaza, including the return of the Palestinian Authority to the Gaza Strip, international forces taking control, a UN police force,

and more, all carry significant risks. However, the years of Israeli military government in the Gaza Strip, at least until the outbreak of the first intifada in December 1987, appear to have been a historically peaceful and prosperous period in the Gaza Strip. Therefore, it would not be unreasonable to consider the establishment of a temporary Israeli military government in Gaza until a regional solution to the Gaza issue is implemented.

The first step, therefore, is the establishment of a full Israeli military government over the entire Gaza Strip, despite its economic drawbacks and high cost. This Israeli military government would work to maintain order and security and would enable international support for Gaza's rehabilitation after its occupation. The establishment of this military government, initiated by Israel, should clarify from the outset that it is a temporary government aimed at ensuring peace and security until a regional solution receives international support.

The second stage, following the establishment of the military government, is for Israel to seek the integration of local and regional forces, including military forces, into the newly formed government. This would mainly include local Palestinian elements, Egyptians, and additional regional countries with an interest in maintaining security stability in the region.

Israel has a history with multinational forces in the context of the Israeli-Arab conflict, and it is not necessarily a positive one. Therefore, in the case of Gaza, the regional force established to ensure peace and stability may also include the IDF (Israel Defense Forces). Israel would play a dominant role in this multinational force and would operate in collaboration with other contributing parties.

The Swords of Iron War is demonstrating that the Gaza issue is not just a localized conflict between Israel and Hamas or between Israel and the Palestinians, but rather a regional problem. Hence, the future of Gaza is embedded in a regional solution in which Israel plays an integral part and is a full participant. A regional solution for Gaza is a political and diplomatic interest for other countries in the region and the international community, particularly the United States. Israeli success at shaping a regional solution that guarantees its security would be a strategic change and a significant achievement.

Dr. (Lt. Col.) Shaul Bartal is a senior researcher at the BESA Center and a research fellow at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Lisbon. During his military service, he served in various roles in the West Bank. He has also taught in the Department of Middle Eastern Studies and the Department of Political Science.