



BULLETIN

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The International Context of the Israeli Offensive in the Gaza Strip

by Patrycja Sasnal

The aim of the Israeli 'Cast Lead' operation in the Gaza Strip is to weaken Hamas militarily and politically so as to prevent it from playing an active role in Middle Eastern politics. Given the lack of United States involvement, an end to armed operations in the strip will only be possible once Israel reaches its aims. The mediation of France and countries of the region can speed up the process of reaching a ceasefire agreement, but the negotiation and implementation of such an accord will be so complicated that the withdrawal of Israeli troops from the Gaza Strip seems unlikely in the immediate future.

Causes. The major causes of the military action taken by Israel include its determination to halt the process of consolidation of the Hamas Islamic Resistance Movement and to restore Israel's image as a regional military power—an image undermined by the unsuccessful July 2006 war against Hezbollah. Given Hamas' growing arsenal of weapons and its strengthening position on the regional stage (including contacts with Egypt and Jordan), negotiating a new ceasefire (the previous one concluded in June 2008) could have entailed unfavourable concessions for Israel. Any agreement to lift the blockade of the strip as demanded by Hamas would have been interpreted as recognition of the organization's lasting control over Gaza. With those factors in mind, the Israeli authorities decided to carry out an offensive that had been planned for several months, if not longer, while the renewed shelling of Israeli territory by Hamas after the expiry of the ceasefire served as a pretext to launch it. The context of parliamentary elections, scheduled to take place in February 2009, is also significant. In pre-electoral public opinion polls, the ruling Kadima and Labour Party coalition, was trailing behind the right-wing Likud party.

Israel's Aims and the Strategy of Hamas. Israel's military targets in this operation include the greatest possible weakening of Hamas through strikes against the leadership and structures of the organization, and against the infrastructure it relies on, as well as the destruction of accumulated arms arsenal, especially rockets (several thousand, mostly of the Qassam type). The neutralization of Hamas' military capabilities is to preclude further shelling of Israeli territory. The most important political objective of the 'Cast Lead' operation is to isolate Hamas on the regional and international stage. In the long-term perspective, it seems that Israel's actions could also be aimed at facilitating the take-over of political power in Gaza by the Fatah party, which is already governing in the West Bank.

For Hamas, which in Palestinian public opinion polls had been trailing visibly behind Fatah (also in Gaza), the confrontation with Israel meant an opportunity to regain support. Following earlier Israeli actions against Hamas, the organization gained public support and new recruits despite the losses it sustained, although there is little evidence that Hamas intended to provoke an armed conflict on the present scale. At present, Hamas' consent to a ceasefire without either visible success in the field or an Israeli declaration to ease the blockade would be seen as an admission of defeat—something the organization cannot risk if it wishes to preserve its status and control over Gaza.

Regional Context. The Fatah party—despite the demonstrative breaking of talks with Israel by the Authority government it controls—acquiesces to the Israeli military operation in Gaza, perceiving

potential gains from weakening Hamas. Most of the Arab League members view the conflict in similar light. Egypt wants to maintain good relations with both Israel and the US and is hoping for a weakened Hamas, which is a faction of the Muslim Brotherhood, an organization that threatens the rule of Hosni Mubarak. Neither is support for Hamas in the interest of Jordan or Hamas' principal Arab ally—Syria. Hezbollah is also unlikely to get involved in the conflict, absorbed as it is with domestic developments in Lebanon and the coming elections. Iran, Hamas' main sponsor, will not support it actively, determined not to escalate tensions with the United States prior to the transfer of power to the new administration, while the continuing conflict in Gaza additionally diverts attention from the Iranian nuclear programme. Nonetheless, countries of the region, such as Egypt, Syria or Turkey, can play an extremely important role as intermediaries in contacts with Hamas.

Global Context and Diplomatic Steps. So far, the international community's actions aimed at a ceasefire have proven unsuccessful, because the weakening of Hamas is considered a favourable outcome not only by some countries of the region, but also by the US and the EU. Moreover, Israel launched the 'Cast Lead' operation at an exceptionally propitious moment. Firstly, the United States, the only country that can influence Israel's actions, is preoccupied with the transfer of power to the new administration. President George W. Bush's administration expressed its support for the military operation in Gaza, blaming Hamas for the situation. Israel is calculating that the Gaza operation, by weakening Hamas, will create new power relations, placing president Obama—who announced his active involvement in finding a solution to the Arab–Israeli conflict—before the necessity to reformulate his Middle Eastern strategy accordingly. At present, both the Bush administration, which is refraining from any involvement in resolving the conflict, and President-elect Obama, who is not taking a stand on the issue, are awaiting the outcome of the confrontation in Gaza. Secondly, the presidency of the European Union has been assumed by the Czech Republic, a country with no significant interests in the Middle East and one that is additionally a close ally of the US and Israel. Under the circumstances, it was French president Nicolas Sarkozy who took over the initiative in European actions.

Israel is seeking an agreement that would, at the very least, guarantee that Hamas would not be able to obtain arms from outside. In practice, this would entail sealing the border of the Gaza Strip through the international monitoring of Gaza border crossings. The EU could play a role here by resuming the EUBAM Rafah mission (suspended in 2007 when Hamas assumed control over Gaza) with the participation of Palestinian Authority representatives. Another solution would be to establish French–Turkish monitoring. Such a proposal was most probably presented to the Israelis by France and Egypt. Given that EU representatives cannot hold direct talks with Hamas, which the Union sees as a terrorist organization, the success of the French initiative depends on the cooperation of Arab countries, mainly Egypt and Syria. Adopted with one abstention (USA), Resolution 1860 of the UN Security Council, which called on Israel to cease fire immediately, but did not demand its withdrawal from Gaza, was a product of compromise and thus was a weak instrument of pressure on the sides of the conflict.

Conclusions. It seems that—until Obama assumes the presidency of the United States—the termination of the military operation in Gaza will only be possible when Israel decides that it has reached its military and political objectives. At that point, it will either decide to unilaterally end its military operations or accept a ceasefire agreement with the participation of mediators. Even though the latter scenario seems more probable, the very formula of the future agreement is highly problematic, as Hamas cannot officially be a party thereto (although its provisions will affect Hamas). Even after an agreement is reached, its implementation will not be swift, and until it is in force Israeli troops are likely to remain in Gaza. Occasional use of force by both sides can also be expected. The situation could change when Barack Obama takes over as president of the United States, because due to the growing number of civilian casualties and pressure from international public opinion he may be forced to exert strong pressure on Israel on the ceasefire issue.

While Hamas' military potential has been significantly undermined as a result of the 'Cast Lead' operation, the organization retains an extensive political structure and a network of institutions and cells active on behalf of the residents of Gaza. Hence Israel will not succeed in eliminating it completely, while the impact of present developments on the future strength of the organization remains uncertain. In the short term, the results of the confrontation may prove beneficial to Hamas, but in the longer term, it could lose the support of Palestinians disappointed with the effects of its policies.