



INSS Insight No. 386, November 21, 2012

International Aspects of Operation Pillar of Defense

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Israel has had to take international factors into account in all of its military engagements with its neighbors. It seems, however, that the political sensitivity to regional circumstances that Israel must exercise in Operation Pillar of Defense in Gaza exceeds any level of political sensitivity required of Israel in previous military encounters.

The Middle East has undergone profound regime changes since Operation Cast Lead (December 2008-January 2009). Most relevant to the current situation in Gaza is of course the change that has taken place in Egypt. During Operation Cast Lead, Israel was able to assume it shared a tacit understanding with Egypt, which was itself in an ongoing confrontation with the Muslim Brotherhood. Now, however, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, which is the spiritual leader of all similar movements elsewhere in the Arab world, including Hamas, controls the Egyptian presidency, government, and Parliament, and has also asserted its supremacy over the military. Regarding Israel, the Muslim Brotherhood has made clear its opposition to the 1979 Treaty of Peace since the treaty was signed.

Even before Mubarak's regime collapsed, Egypt's relations with Israel were all but a dead letter. The sole exception was the open channels of communication maintained between the two countries' security authorities. US economic assistance, and especially military assistance, was the glue that held Israel-Egyptian relations together. With the ascent of the Muslim Brotherhood to power, the already precarious relationship has been put in even greater danger of deteriorating. Indeed, as the recent hostilities erupted, Egypt was quick to recall its newly appointed ambassador to Israel. An Israeli ground attack could push Egypt to act against its own vital interests and take more extreme steps. This in turn would have a direct impact on Egypt's relations with Washington and the future of US economic assistance.

Relations with the US are also at the forefront among Israeli decision makers. President Obama spoke with Prime Minister Netanyahu on November 16, 2012 and reiterated "US support for Israel's right to defend itself." Even after the telephone call between the US and Egyptian Presidents on November 19, 2012, there was no indication that the US had

pressed for a limitation on Israel's military activities. It is clear, however, that any ground operation resulting in a large number of casualties, while also pushing Egypt into a corner politically, may cause complications in the already uneasy US-Egypt relations. The fact that the US President chose to stand by Israel in his first test since his reelection is viewed in Israel with relief and as evidence against those who predicted a vengeful second-term President. Israel wishes to capitalize on this positive atmosphere, particularly as the major issue, i.e. Iran, is still the most urgent item on the US-Israel agenda and the issue on which Israel wishes to reach the highest degree of coordination and understanding possible with the US. For this reason, reaching an early ceasefire and removing the confrontation with Hamas from the agenda, even if only temporarily, is critical to Israel's long term interests.

In the second tier, the Israeli leadership must consider the implications of its action in Gaza for its relations with the Palestinian Authority, Jordan, and Turkey. It is quite plausible that one of the factors that motivated Hamas to escalate the violence was the desire to preempt the Palestinian Authority's anticipated "victory" at the United Nations when its request for a non-member state status will likely be granted. While there is anger in Jerusalem towards the PA for this move, it is clear that it is with Abu Mazen that Israel will be asked to deal once the new Israeli government is established in the aftermath of the January 22, 2013 elections. While Abu Mazen may be able to restrain his reaction to Israel's air operations, he, like Egypt, would be forced to react more extremely if Israel launches a ground attack, and certainly if it renews its occupation of Gaza.

As the military confrontation between Hamas and Israel continues, and certainly if it escalates to a ground attack, Jordan too will face more trouble and attacks by the Muslim Brotherhood opposition. Israel follows the domestic situation in Jordan with great concern and has a deep interest in seeing stability restored in its eastern neighbor.

Notwithstanding renewed efforts to mend bilateral relations with Ankara, Turkey's Prime Minister, who sought to play a role in the effort to end the military confrontation, criticized the Israeli reaction to the Hamas rocket attacks harshly. Israel did well not to react to Turkey's one-sidedness, and it should refrain from crediting Turkey with contributing to the ceasefire, once achieved.

The European Union's Foreign Affairs Council issued a statement on November 19, 2012 in which it strongly condemned the rocket attacks on Israel and recognized Israel's right to defend its citizens. It also called for proportionality and an immediate cessation of hostility. The statement can be viewed with satisfaction in Jerusalem. In the long run, if a ceasefire is to hold for a reasonable length of time, a mechanism for monitoring and supervision will have to be established. It is clear that the US would not be directly involved in this, but it is possible that the EU, either collectively or through individual member states, could be involved. Any monitoring mechanism would of course be

subject to the nature of the agreement leading to the ceasefire, as well as to agreement from Egypt.

The experience gained from implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1701 following the Second Lebanon War (2006), and later, the arrangements that helped end Operation Cast Lead, show the limitations of these agreements. In the absence of a strong will by the authorities in the areas in question as well as in those beyond their borders, it will be difficult to seal off the territories against the smuggling of weapons. Egypt holds a key role in the prevention of Hamas and other groups operating in and from Gaza. The US and Europe can certainly influence Egypt's resolve to prevent its soil from being used as a corridor for arms on their way to Gaza.

