Operation Protective Edge: The Goals, and the Strategy to Achieve Them

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On the evening of July 7, 2014, it finally became clear that Hamas was not prepared to cooperate with the Israeli government's policy of restraint and Egypt's mediation efforts to restore a ceasefire and return to the understandings achieved after Operation Pillar of Defense. Hamas' demands for a different agreement that restricts Israeli actions; its demands that the Rafah border crossing be opened and that prisoners from the Shalit deal who have been sent back to prison be released; and the rocket barrages that have not stopped notwithstanding Israel's restraint, have forced Israel to enter a campaign it did not want.

What follows are twelve understandings about the objectives of the current campaign, Operation Protective Edge, and how it differs from Operations Cast Lead and Pillar of Defense.

1. The strategic purpose of the operation is derived from the state's obligation to fulfill its basic obligation to protect its citizens and enable them to pursue a normal way of life. Restoring deterrence to achieve another period of quiet was a major strategic achievement of prior operations and is a primary objective of the current campaign. While deterrence addresses the motivation to fire at Israel, the current operation should also deal with the capabilities of Hamas and smaller terrorist organizations, particularly Islamic jihad and the Popular Resistance Committees. The operation must be directed mainly against the military wing of Hamas and the other terrorist organizations, and strike a severe blow against their commanders, operatives, launching capabilities, and production capacity. Another important objective of the operation, which was not defined and thus not achieved in the past, is to prevent Hamas from undertaking a military buildup in the period after the operation. The fact that the tunnels used by Hamas for its military buildup after Cast Lead and Pillar of Defense were destroyed and closed by the Egyptians will make it possible to ensure that after a significant blow is struck at

production facilities in Gaza, the post-operation buildup, if there is any, will be slow and limited.

2. As in previous operations, the military objective should not be to occupy Gaza for the purpose of toppling Hamas. Israel disengaged from Gaza and relinquished responsibility for the territory and its 1.5 million Palestinian residents. Hamas is weak politically and economically, and it should be weakened militarily as well. A harsh blow against Hamas to achieve deterrence and deny it the ability to grow stronger in the future is the correct objective. However, turning Gaza into an area without a government that can be held responsible would be a strategic error.

3. One of Hamas' main elements of power, designed to offset Israel's advantages in high quality intelligence and precise firing capabilities, is its underground network. Hamas has built underground capabilities on a large scale for both defense and offense. Gaza has a network of underground tunnels and shelters, which are used not only by the Hamas leadership but also by a large number of military operatives. The attack prepared in a Hamas offensive tunnel in southern Gaza was supposed to be a strategic surprise by the group, and its prevention is an important achievement for the IDF. This is also true of the killing of the terrorists who attempted, under cover of fire, to land on the Zikim beach and carry out an attack. A squadron of terrorists that comes out of an offensive tunnel into Israeli territory, and it is correct to assume that there are other such tunnels, can carry out a major attack with serious consequences. It is important that the IDF succeed in uncovering other offensive tunnels and in finding creative ways to turn the defensive tunnels into a trap that Hamas has dug for itself.

4. It is important to note the loss of the "surprise first move." In the two previous operations, the IDF was able to achieve tactical surprise and strike manned headquarters (in Cast Lead), and the head of the Hamas military wing and long range launchers (in Operation Pillar of Defense). On the evening of July 7, 2014, Hamas proved that it learns from its experience. It was able to dictate the time of the campaign, a time when it is well entrenched and less exposed than in the past. Hamas has attempted and is attempting to surprise Israel with additional capabilities, long range rockets that go beyond Tel Aviv, ground invasions, and unmanned aerial vehicles. Thus far, it has not succeeded in surprising the IDF, which has thwarted its "new" capabilities. At the same time, Hamas will presumably continue in its attempts to surprise.

5. The resilience of the Israeli home front: The ability of the Israeli home front to withstand a campaign that lasts for more than a week is a key factor in the

outcome of the campaign. A recurrent public behavior pattern in campaigns against semi-state terrorist organizations (Hizbollah and Hamas) in the past decade is anticipated this time as well. The public goes through a number of cycles. Initially, there is a consensus in favor of a campaign, and in the first days there is sweeping support, particularly if there are noteworthy achievements. Then, as injuries to the home front and soldiers increase and there is a realization that there will be no total victory, the public becomes impatient and critical. The military operation's success must be based on a high level of legitimacy, which the government had when it started the operation, thanks to its policy of restraint, and also on good protection for the home front, in which Iron Dome is a key factor. However, the ability of the IAF and maneuvering troops to strike the launchers is also very important. Furthermore, success depends on proven, unequivocal achievements against the enemy. The Israeli public is prepared to withstand a great deal if it sees significant strategic achievements.

6. The time factor: The Israeli public's impatience, international pressure, the danger of escalation, and collateral damage to uninvolved civilians could force an end to the operation before its strategic objectives are achieved. Therefore, in the coming days, a gradual approach should be avoided as much as possible and full force used. The extent of the attack and the value of the targets are very important for achieving the goals of the operation.

7. A combined operation, with air and ground attacks, based on intelligence: The public tends to see only two models of action, aerial or aerial with a large scale ground operation to occupy Gaza. Yet even if we do not intend to occupy Gaza, a ground operation is necessary and almost essential. There is a high level of synergy between an aerial operation and a ground operation. Without a ground operation, Hamas will remain underground. A ground operation against high value targets will create friction with the terrorist organizations' military wing and allow both an aerial and a ground force to attack them and their operational infrastructures. In any case, even a ground operation, and certainly an aerial operation, are dependent on high quality intelligence. The higher the quality of the intelligence, the less need there is for a ground maneuver.

8. State responsibility: In the previous two operations, it was possible to view Gaza as a state controlled by Hamas, and under international law, attack government buildings, the political leadership, and even infrastructures. Operation Protective Edge started one moment after Hamas ostensibly relinquished responsibility for Gaza and formally "gave the keys" to Abu Mazen. It is convenient for Hamas to adopt the Hizbollah model of having a private army in a state for which it is not

responsible. Israel must again make it clear that it sees Hamas as responsible for everything that takes place in Gaza. Proposals have been sounded to strike militarily at state infrastructures in Gaza. There is no political or military logic in doing so. If it wishes to exert pressure on Hamas, which controls Gaza, Israel has the ability to stop the supply of electricity, fuel, and food without firing a shot, since it controls the border crossings and the electric switches. The more the conflict develops and the longer it lasts, the more effort must be invested to ensure that a humanitarian crisis does not occur in Gaza. The Palestinians will attempt to depict events in a way that serves their needs, and we must make sure that we read the picture correctly and do not allow unnecessary harm to those not involved in the fighting.

9. Controlling regional escalation: Those assessing the situation from intelligence and planning perspectives must estimate how much freedom of action there is in Gaza and weigh it against the risk of escalation in other, more dangerous fronts. One of the reasons for the government's restraint in the past week was the fear that riots would break out in the Palestinian Authority, in East Jerusalem, and among Israeli Arabs. This risk has not disappeared, and if operational errors occur and uninvolved civilians are hurt, the risk could be significant. Another more serious risk is that the northern front with Hizbollah or even Syria could heat up, though there is very little chance that this will indeed occur. Hizbollah and Damascus are busy with Syria's civil war and have not responded in recent years to what purportedly were Israeli actions against them. However, the concept of low probability is loaded and dangerous. Even if it is unlikely, the possibility of a flare-up on the northern front, which would be very serious, means that working assumptions and the entire situation must be examined continuously.

10. Egypt: In previous operations against Hamas, Egypt served as both mediator and brakes. It is also an indirect target for Hamas fire, since the organization is attempting to ease the blockade of Gaza, i.e., open the Rafah border crossing and the tunnels. Egypt in 2014 is different from both Egypt under Mubarak (Cast Lead), which was very sensitive to the Egyptian "street" and its response to the operation, and Egypt under Morsi (Pillar of Defense), which viewed Hamas as an ally. Egypt under al-Sisi has not succeeded in preventing conflict and renewing the understandings from Pillar of Defense. This failure lies in Egypt's hostility to Hamas and its eagerness for an Israeli attack on Hamas, but also in the fact that the agreements reached between Egypt and the Hamas political leadership have not been honored by the organization's military wing, which operates independently. Egypt, however, makes a distinction between Hamas, which it is

prepared to attack, and a broad attack on Palestinians in Gaza, which it does not find acceptable.

11. Iran: One of the arguments for continued restraint by the Israeli government is Israeli strategic priorities. There is no doubt that the Prime Minister sees the Iranian nuclear threat as a much greater threat than terror from Gaza. The world powers and Iran are moving toward the signing of an agreement on July 20, 2014. The Prime Minister does not want political, strategic, and media attention to be diverted from the issue he views as the most important. However, the conventional assessment is that the negotiations with Iran will not be concluded in the near future, which affords a period of time to deal with the terror from Gaza.

12. The exit mechanism: When it enters a military conflict, the military and political leadership must be certain that it has a viable exit mechanism. It can use international mechanisms, such as the United Nations Security Council, mediation, or indirect negotiations through a third country (Egypt, Turkey, or Qatar), as well as military mechanisms – escalation or unilateral withdrawal. Cast Lead was stopped unilaterally, and Hamas accepted the ceasefire because it had suffered a heavy blow. Pillar of Defense was stopped with the help of Egyptian mediation. It is very important for decision makers to have a clear understanding of the mechanism they wish to use to end the operation, and for the exit to take place when the IDF achieves the strategic goal for which the operation was launched.