Operation Protective Edge: Possible Scenarios for What Lies Ahead

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The starting assumption for an analysis of possible scenarios regarding Operation Protective Edge is that the fighting began when Hamas was increasingly weakened in the Gaza Strip and had little to lose. This situation differs from what existed at the start of previous IDF operations in Gaza against Hamas, which ended with agreements or understandings, brokered by Egypt, that formed a truce of sorts. The analysis below of possible scenarios for the continuation and conclusion of the current round of fighting is premised on this difference.

The assessment that Hamas is at an exceptionally weak point rests on several developments in recent months, resulting mainly from the change of regime in Egypt. As a result of this turnover, Hamas has lost the ability to manage life in Gaza in a manner similar to what was possible when the tunnels and border crossings were open. The cutoff in the flow of essential resources has boosted unemployment, which now exceeds 40 percent. Hamas has begun to feel the loss of public support in the Gaza Strip and has had difficulty controlling the area. This was also a factor in the agreement by the organization's leadership to establish a Palestinian national unity government.

The abduction of the three teenagers in Gush Etzion led to a harsh Israeli response against Hamas in the West Bank. In this context, Israel struck at one of the group's great achievements: prisoners released in the Shalit deal. Hamas sees this as a spark igniting further deterioration, ending in a loss of control in Gaza.

Based on this premise, it is clear that Israel faces a Hamas that sees fighting as the least problematic option. Insofar as Hamas believes that it can restore its standing through its ability to attack and inflict damage, fighting is its only chance to stop it from growing weaker and restore its absolute power in Gaza, and in the future, in the entire Palestinian Authority. This is also reflected in the organization's demands for a ceasefire – not only the release of the Shalit prisoners, but also the opening of the border crossings with Egypt and more. From Hamas' perspective, if the fighting ends with a return to the status quo ante, this could be interpreted not only as surrender to Israel, but also as one of the last nails in the coffin of its control of the Gaza Strip.

With Israel and Hamas continuing to attack each other, the government of Israel seeking at least "to restore quiet to the country's population," and Hamas wanting achievements that will ensure its rule, there are a number of possible scenarios regarding the continuation and conclusion of the fighting. The range of possible scenarios demonstrates the extent of the uncertainty in the current situation.[1]

1. **The fighting continues over time within the current parameters**. In this scenario, the two sides will avoid escalation beyond Palestinian rocket fire and Israeli aerial strikes, or initiatives and actions of a different kind will be thwarted. There is even a possibility that Israel will decide to cease its attacks unilaterally in order to test Hamas. In such a scenario, a cessation of hostilities is possible if, as a result of Israeli strikes, the Gazan population begins to pressure Hamas. It is difficult to imagine that such pressure will develop in the coming days, and therefore, the fighting will likely continue for some time. Other possibilities for ceasing hostilities could develop if the two sides move to one of the following four scenarios.

2. **Israel launches a large scale ground operation and retains control of the territory for a long time**. In this scenario, Israel would decide to put an end to the rocket fire and would make massive use of ground forces to destroy the infrastructure that makes the rocket fire possible. Regardless of which of the several possible moves would be chosen, this option would likely require a massive presence of ground forces in Gaza over time. According to this scenario, a cessation of hostilities, i.e., rocket fire and counterattacks, is possible only if IDF units advance far into the Gaza Strip and prevent rocket fire by seizing and dismantling the launching capabilities of Hamas and other organizations. Preventing the renewal of rocket fire will require a prolonged IDF presence in the Gaza Strip, and perhaps even the toppling of the Hamas government, which in turn would require that Israel manage the needs of the Gaza population. Thus, there will be prolonged ground combat against Hamas, the Islamic Jihad, and others within Gaza. Other possibilities for a cessation of hostilities could develop if the sides move to one of the following three scenarios. (The significance of a massive Israeli presence in Gaza for a long period of time is beyond the scope of this analysis.)

3. **Hamas achieves a semblance of victory**. In this scenario, a situation develops in one of the two previous scenarios in which Hamas can claim victory over Israel and make an assessment that this situation will greatly enhance its image and prestige among the population in Gaza and among Palestinians in general. Such a situation would be possible, for example, in the wake of a very deadly attack in Israel, or if there are a large number of casualties among IDF soldiers in Gaza. The Israeli response could also be very deadly and lead to outside intervention. A cessation of hostilities in this

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[1] This analysis is correct as of late Saturday, July 12, 2014.

situation would be possible if an agreement were reached as a result of Hamas' willingness to reduce its demands because it feels that it has emerged victorious from the conflict, or as a result of pressures within Israel, and from international actors, to stop the fighting.

4. **The Palestinian population receives a resounding blow**. In this scenario, there is a dramatic increase in the number of losses among the Palestinian population as a result of one or more incidents. This would lead to a change in current Egyptian policy on the one hand, and to international intervention on the other, with the result that Israel would come under heavy pressure to reach an immediate ceasefire with Hamas. The change in Egyptian policy could be reflected in the opening of the Rafah border crossing and the reduction of pressure on the tunnels. This change, along with certain Israeli concessions, could give Hamas the required semblance of victory.

5. **Israel initiates a ceasefire agreement with Hamas**. In this scenario, Israel would seek to reach an agreement with Hamas and be prepared to withdraw, to one extent or another, from its current opening position. Various motives might prompt this change in Israeli policy – the need to return to normalcy in Israel as soon as possible, a realization that there is no relevant alternative to the Hamas government in the Gaza Strip, and others. The Israeli initiative will assume that Hamas must be allowed to present some kind of achievement (for example, coordination with Egypt in a certain opening of the border crossings), which will allow it to claim victory and reinforce its legitimacy in the Gaza Strip.

These five scenarios could unfold now. Two additional scenarios go beyond those presented above and should be analyzed in another framework:

1. A scenario involving a long term IDF presence within the Gaza Strip, which could lead to developments within Gaza and the international system.
2. A scenario based on assessments by experts and others that it is necessary to reach an agreement that will change the current arrangement in the Gaza Strip by involving Egypt, the Palestinian Authority, other Arab states, and the international community.

In conclusion, the analysis presented here does not dictate the "bottom line," and it is impossible to highlight the most likely scenario. Rather, the range of scenarios demonstrates the great uncertainty latent in the situation, even several days after the start of the fighting. This is in contrast to the past, when Hamas had more assets, and thus paid a greater price for fighting.