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Operation Protective Edge: Six Insights, Six Recommendations

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Six Insights on the Situation

Asymmetrical strategic equilibrium: After nearly three weeks of confrontation between Israel and terrorist organizations in the Gaza Strip, during which some 1,500 rockets have been fired at Israeli cities and towns and Israel has undertaken some 3,500 aerial strikes on Gaza, there is a strategic equilibrium, albeit essentially asymmetrical, between Israel and Hamas. The “asymmetric draw” is an important concept that likewise depicts some of Israel’s past strategic situations. The current asymmetry stems first of all from the fact that Hamas operates by the rules of a terrorist organization firing indiscriminately at civilians, whereas Israel, governed by international law, restricts itself to strike only military targets and labors to avoid harming innocent bystanders.

A second point of asymmetry has to do with the objective of the confrontation and the definition of victory. Hamas can claim that it disrupted the civilian routine throughout Israel and damaged Israel’s economy and its foreign relations without being defeated. Given the asymmetry of military means, a non-defeat is, from Hamas’ perspective, a victory. Therefore, projecting a picture of victory is easy: it is enough to show Israelis lying down on the side of the road when sirens warn of incoming rockets and the pictures of soldiers killed in battle on the front pages of the country’s newspapers. Israel, by contrast, must deal Hamas a truly heavy blow in order to achieve its strategic objectives.

On the other hand, Israel enjoys an immeasurable qualitative advantage in terms of the power of its weapon systems compared to those available to Hamas and hence also the ability to escalate the campaign – a prerogative Hamas has already lost. This aspect of asymmetry has grown even more pronounced, because Hamas has resumed operating like a resistance terrorist group, having handed responsibility for the Gaza Strip back to the PA and the government of technocrats convened following the reconciliation agreement with Fatah. Hamas’ internal balance of power has shifted in favor of the military wing, which has bolstered its status as the major element of power in the organization.

Defensive strategy: Both sides have excelled in their defensive strategies. Israel astounded Hamas and the world at large with its ability to provide an almost hermetic response to Hamas' rocket attacks, which have hit the proverbial brick wall in the form of Israel's Iron Dome. Thanks to good intelligence and effective, rapid operational activity, Israel has foiled most of Hamas' surprises, especially mass-casualty terrorist attacks and abductions via tunnels dug into Israel. Hamas has concentrated on defending its military wing and political leadership, which have disappeared underground into reinforced bunkers beneath civilian installations. Ironically, the "iron dome" protecting Hamas' military wing is Gaza's civilian population – the very population that Hamas places on rooftops and – contrary to international law – in close proximity to firepower activity and the hideouts of its command structure.

Preparedness for the confrontation: Hamas prepared well for this round of fighting. It seems to have studied the IDF strategy and operational tools of the 2009 and 2012 operations and devised a systemic response to them. The IDF, which did not initiate the current confrontation, was dragged into it without an up-to-date strategy, an effective opening strike, new operational ideas, and sufficient understanding of the enemy's rationale. Israel seems to have assumed that Hamas would be pressured by the increased scope and intensity of the attacks and would therefore be forced to end the confrontation in similar fashion to the way it ended previous rounds. However, relinquishing responsibility on the civic and political fronts freed Hamas up to ignore Israel's attacks on "the State of Gaza" and concentrate instead on the military wing. This change in Hamas' approach did not penetrate IDF thinking, which tallied airstrikes instead of concentrating on targeting the military wing's commanders and capabilities. The IDF clung to the concept of "another round" and the graduated use of force, instead of changing its paradigm and treating this as a confrontation unlike those of the past.

Attainment of goals: At the time of this writing, the strategic goals of the operations have not been achieved. Israel has not yet formulated a systemic approach and the appropriate offensive operational tools to achieve its strategic goals. Ten days ago Israel was forced to act to upset the strategic stalemate in light of the understanding that even the modest goals of the operation presented by the Prime Minister – restoring the calm, rehabilitating Israel's deterrence, and dealing the military wing of Hamas a harsh blow – were not achieved by the aerial phase alone. However, the limited ground maneuver Israel has undertaken, designed to destroy the tunnels, has likewise not changed the situation dramatically. This phase, which neutralizes a significant Hamas strategic capability and thereby denies Hamas the opportunity to escalate the situation, is very important, but is by no means enough. The survival of Hamas' military wing is an achievement for Hamas, along with its ability to continue launching rockets at Israel's civilian front throughout the fighting and even to disrupt civilian air traffic to Israel. The ground incursion as it has

unfolded to date is far from maximizing IDF power, is focused primarily on defensive activity, and is not marked by the requisite creativity – whereas Hamas has clearly internalized lessons from previous rounds. Is the inadequate damage to Hamas' military wing the result of intelligence flaws? Or, if the inadequate damage is intentional, does it stem from the justified concern not to harm innocent bystanders? Or is the operating assumption – that Hamas should be preserved as responsible for Gaza – simply incorrect?

The importance of legitimacy: Israel enjoys a relatively high degree of legitimacy, among its allies and even in the Arab world, stemming from Hamas' refusal to accept the Prime Minister's "calm for calm" proposal in the initial days of the operation, its refusal to accept the Egyptian ceasefire proposal, and the blatancy with which it violated the humanitarian ceasefire. Not only President Obama and Chancellor Merkel support Israel's right to defend itself against rockets aimed at civilians; the Egyptian Foreign Minister held Hamas responsible for the civilians killed in Gaza due to its refusal to endorse the ceasefire accepted by Israel. At the same time, while Israel may have the understanding of Western leaders, it does not enjoy the support of international public opinion affected by the graphic photographs of civilian death and destruction coming from Gaza. With the dissemination of photographs taken during the humanitarian ceasefire, the pressure of public opinion has risen and become a subject of consideration for Israeli decision makers, although not to the same degree as in previous confrontations

The regional aspect – risks and opportunities: Thus far, concerns and forecasts of a regional escalation have proven unfounded. Demonstrations by Arabs in Israel and the West Bank in the first two weeks of the operation did not exceed the scope of demonstrations prior to the operation. With the third week of the operation, initial signs of greater unrest surfaced, along with fatalities on the West Bank. Nonetheless, the assumption remains that a violent third intifada is not the option preferred by President Abbas and PA leaders in Ramallah. Its cost is understood and represents a serious deterrent. The few rockets fired from Lebanon and Syria were not the opening volleys of a second front, and Israel contained these isolated events well. The rockets were launched by small, fringe Palestinian organizations incapable of setting another front ablaze. Neither Hizbollah, enmeshed in fighting jihadists in Syria, nor Assad will open a military front on behalf of Hamas, which two years ago abandoned the radical pro-Iranian axis. The nuclear talks with Iran, which were extended last week, also did not end in a crisis or a "bad deal," thus diverting Israel's attention. Additionally, the crisis exposed the regional set of alliances and overlapping interests. The fact that Israel, Egypt, the PA, and the Arab Gulf states (excluding Qatar) are aligned against Hamas and its allies represents opportunities for diplomatic and financial activity against Hamas and the channeling of other issues in a positive direction in the wider Palestinian arena.

Six Recommended Action Items

Changing the basic assumption that Hamas must be preserved as the entity responsible for Gaza: This assumption causes multiple damage: it prevents extremely harsh damage to Hamas lest it fall; it makes Hamas think it can extend the fighting without paying for it with its own demise; and it prevents the possibility in the long term of restoring the PA as Gaza's dominant power. The assumption that if Hamas falls it will be succeeded by more radical groups requires closer analysis. What organization can threaten Israel more than Hamas and shoot rockets farther than Haifa? What element can dig dozens of terrorist tunnels? It is time to rethink the doomsday forecasts of "a global jihad tsunami" that haven't materialized in the past – neither from Afghanistan to Iraq, nor from Sinai to the Golan. Any radical organization that seizes control of Gaza should Hamas collapse (and it is not at all clear that every Hamas substitute would be radical) would have to spend years building the terrorist infrastructure Hamas has already constructed.

Continued military pressure – from both the ground and air – to inflict severe damage on Hamas' military wing: Once we shake off the assumption that Hamas must be preserved as the responsible party in Gaza, attention must focus on expanding the military move to deal a severe blow to Hamas' military wing. The military wing is preventing the ceasefire and must therefore be pummeled and weakened. The entrance of ground troops has already resulted in some achievements: the discovery and destruction of tunnels, limited damage to the military wing, and engagement that has yielded new, high quality intelligence. Still, the current ground campaign is not a maneuver that unsettles the enemy's equilibrium. Thus the campaign should continue, and Gaza should be sectioned into different units. This would generate pressure on specific areas from which Hamas is firing and in which it has a significant military presence. Surprise maneuvers, encirclement, the destruction of rocket launch sites, evacuation of civilians, and intelligence and operational efforts to reach Hamas' manufacturing, launch, and command and control centers are all necessary moves. The leadership of Hamas must decide that a ceasefire is preferable to continued fighting. It must feel that the noose is tightening and the IDF is closing in.

Working toward an unequivocal balance favoring Israel: Ending the campaign against Hamas with a strategic deadlock would project Israeli weakness elsewhere as well. Hamas is Israel's weakest enemy. Hizbollah has many more missiles and rockets and many more warheads of much greater accuracy. Damascus and Tehran too will study the results of the current campaign. To be sure, every arena has its particular features and Israel's deterrence against states is much more effective than against terrorist organizations. However, a drawn-out campaign without a clear-cut decision – the fourth in a row – in which Israel undertakes a limited ground maneuver while leaving its enemy with strategic military capabilities because it is protected by civilians, and failure to

destroy Hamas' military and civilian leaderships are only some of the factors constituting the final balance liable to erode Israel's deterrence and lead to other confrontations in arenas much more complex than Gaza. The systemic rationale driving the IDF must be that Hamas must pay an immeasurably high price, not only in infrastructures but primarily in its key force components, the leadership and senior military command, and the ability to attack the State of Israel.

Preventing future force buildup is essential for a long period of calm: Neither Operation Cast Lead nor Operation Pillar of Defense created effective mechanisms for preventing Hamas' subsequent force buildup. When examining the arrangement that will be reached at the end of the operation, it is critical to understand that without dealing with force buildup, the next round will be postponed only because of deterrence. Israel's deterrence vis-à-vis Hizbollah is extremely strong (thanks to several factors: the blow Hizbollah was dealt in 2006, which far exceeded what it expected; its responsibility for the Lebanese state; intra-ethnic sensitivities in Lebanon; and the fact that it has no legitimacy for attacking Israel). Against Hamas, Israel's deterrence was not effective enough and did not ensure a long period of calm. It is therefore important to ensure that Hamas force rehabilitation be very slow to nonexistent. The fact that Egypt is currently effective in preventing smuggling, the understandings with other Arab nations opposed to Hamas about joint activity against Hamas' force buildup, and Israel's right to act against the domestic manufacture of strategic weapons and rockets must all be part of any arrangement at the end of Operation Protective Edge.

Ending the economic blockade: Part of Hamas' ongoing endurance is explained by its spokesmen: "We have nothing to lose; the situation in Gaza is so dire that we're not afraid of military blows or the Israeli occupation." This is propaganda that will not survive the test of more pressure on Hamas. Nonetheless, in any future arrangement, it behooves Israel to distinguish between the economic blockade, which must be relaxed, and the military siege, which must be strictly enforced. Wherever there is tension between economic development in Gaza and possible force buildup, the prevention of any force buildup must be paramount. Economic development of Gaza, which will turn the Gazan population to a more positive channel, reduce support for terrorism based on despair, and underscore the cost Gazans will have to pay in another round of violence, is a vested Israeli interest. Therefore, Israel must enlist the international community and moderate Arab nations in an economic development project for Gaza.

A political horizon: In contrast to the clichéd statement that there is no military solution to terrorism, Israel has proven it can solve systemic terrorist threats against it militarily. Nonetheless, the political solution is always to be preferred. That said, a political solution without a militarily advantageous position and the other side's understanding that a

military confrontation will not promote its political goal can only fail. The long term political solution for Gaza is the continued weakening of Hamas – economically, politically, and militarily – and the creation of better political alternatives for both the Palestinians and Israel. Over the last two years, Hamas has been politically and financially weakened. If, after Operation Protective Edge, it is militarily weakened as well, it will be possible – together with Egypt, the moderate Arab states, and the international community – to bring the PA back to Gaza, ensure economic development there, and gradually lift the blockade. This, plus the prevention of force buildup and the demilitarization of the Gaza Strip, will be key factors in stabilizing Gaza and steering it toward favorable development.

