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Is Israel Facing a War of Attrition against Hamas?

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Over the first weekend of August 2014, it became clear once again that Hamas feels it has nothing to lose and that it is prepared to resume the armed conflict in order to force Egypt and Israel to hand it a significant achievement: lifting the Gaza blockade, opening the border crossings, and constructing a seaport. Since the eruption of the current conflict, Hamas has been willing to negotiate under fire, because it realizes that it has no bargaining chips at the negotiating table. Its arsenal contains only the ability to cause damage to all the parties involved, and in particular, Israel.

The manner in which the negotiations are conducted in Cairo, under Egyptian auspices and with the mediation of the General Intelligence Directorate, has demonstrated to Hamas the depth of its isolation. It must contend with Egypt and Israel, which control the “gates” to Gaza. Neither one is prepared to allow Hamas the semblance of success, which would lead to the rehabilitation of its status and reinforce its control over the Gaza Strip. In addition, Hamas is participating as part of a Palestinian delegation led by the Palestinian Authority (PA) – the same Palestinian Authority, under Mahmoud Abbas, with which it is competing for hegemony and control of the Palestinian camp. Hamas is frustrated because Egypt and Israel have taken a firm stand on including the PA in any solution to Gaza, demanding the deployment of PA security forces at the Gaza border crossings and along the border between Gaza and Egypt, and designating the PA as responsible for the rehabilitation of Gaza. Moreover, even the Arab world is not extending a helping hand: Hamas' two patrons, Qatar and Turkey, have been completely excluded from the negotiations. So what is left for Hamas? To conduct negotiations under fire and thus to continue to exert pressure to attain the strategic changes it so desperately needs.

Some seek a military operation that will bring Hamas to its knees and cause it to concede and accept Egypt's ceasefire terms. Thus far, Israel has attained a number of achievements through Operation Protective Edge: Gaza's terrorist infrastructures were destroyed, particularly rocket production systems, storage sites, headquarters, and homes

of terrorist operatives; over 600 Hamas operatives were killed; only 1/3 of the missile and rocket arsenal remains; 32 offensive tunnels were destroyed; Iron Dome provided effective active protection for Israel's residents; the Israeli home front demonstrated resilience; Israel endured minimal economic damage; the strategic alliance between Israel and the regime of Egypt's el-Sisi was consolidated, and the Arab world exhibited understanding toward Israel while it struck Hamas in Gaza.

However, the operation bears a number of negative implications for Israel: Hamas survived the campaign, a fact that has strengthened it; Hamas did not lose the desire, motivation, or ability to continue firing rockets and mortar shells at the Israeli home front; Hamas' military leadership was not damaged, nor was it deterred; Israel's international image was tarnished following the deaths of hundreds of uninvolved civilians and massive destruction in urban areas in the Gaza Strip; Israeli residents living near the Gaza Strip refuse to return home. In conclusion, the "resistance" led by Hamas is alive and kicking.

An examination of Operation Protective Edge's results should not rely solely on an estimated balance of military achievements and failures. What must be taken into account is whether political opportunities to shape a new strategic reality that serves Israel's interests in the Gaza Strip and beyond have emerged in the wake of the operation. Failing to define political objectives for an operation makes it difficult to assess its consequences. Israel has avoided defining political objectives, emphasizing military ones –"calm for calm," and preventing any achievement for Hamas while weakening, restraining, and deterring it. We can assume that the following objectives reflect the Israeli government's policy:

- a. Reaching a long term arrangement that leads to an extended period of calm, investment in infrastructure and economic projects in the Gaza Strip, economic prosperity for the residents of Gaza, strengthened restraining and stabilizing factors, and a significant loss if calm and stability are violated.
- b. Returning the PA under Mahmoud Abbas to the Gaza Strip, granting the PA a central role in running the border crossings between Gaza, Egypt, and Israel, as well as in leading the Gaza rehabilitation project. This objective constitutes a strategic shift from previous Israeli government policy.
- c. Weakening Hamas and depriving it of the power to escalate the situation at any given time. This joins the goals of anchoring the demilitarization of the Gaza Strip from offensive weapons and an international and regional commitment to prevent Hamas force buildup, including establishment of an international implementation mechanism to monitor materials entering Gaza.

- d. Removing Israel's burden of responsibility for the Gazan population and the humanitarian situation.
- e. Establishing regional cooperation with Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, supporting broad objectives and interests beyond reshaping and rebuilding the Gaza Strip, such as stopping Islamist jihadist elements from gaining strength and spreading throughout the Middle East.

Hamas is the main barrier to promotion of these objectives, as it must find a way to explain the current tragic situation to Gaza's residents and compensate them for it. As long as Hamas does not present the Gaza population with a tangible achievement in the form of a lifted economic blockade, it will cling to resistance and fighting, out of lack of choice. As such, we are at a dead end. At the negotiating table, Egypt and Israel are not prepared to grant Hamas any compensation for terrorism. They seek to weaken and neutralize the organization, and are working to create the conditions to replace it with the PA.

If in the absence of achievements in the negotiations Hamas resumes its tactics of launching rockets at Israel, Israel faces three options:

- a. Accepting Hamas as the party in charge of the Gaza Strip and compensating it by significantly easing the economic blockade. This will create the appearance of a Hamas victory, and facilitate consolidation of its control over the Gaza Strip. This option perpetuates rounds of conflict, as every time Hamas feels weakened or threatened, it will use its one form of leverage — terrorism.
- b. Toppling the Hamas regime through an offensive operation and occupation of the Gaza Strip, dismantling the terror infrastructures, and removing offensive weapons from Gaza. Negative consequences of this option include the length of the campaign, and the high casualty count among IDF troops and the civilian population in Gaza. Such a campaign will result in widespread destruction, damage to Israel's international standing, and a lack of certainty concerning who would ultimately take control of the Gaza Strip.
- c. Engaging in a war of attrition as a result of continued firing from Gaza, matched by determination and patience from Israel, believing that it has the ability to erode Hamas' power, weaken it, and bring about a process of internal collapse of the organization. In parallel, a regional and international coalition to return the PA to the Gaza Strip would be established.

As the situation unfolds and if Israel maintains its policy of weakening Hamas, then the more relevant option will be a policy based on attrition. Attrition need not be the exclusive weapon of the weaker party. Israel could also make use of this course of action, given its superiority in regard to resources, its ability to provide a satisfactory protective

solution, and its ability to erode Hamas while abstaining from meeting its demands or easing restrictions at the border crossings – and in fact while increasing restrictions on entry of goods and the energy supply to Gaza. This would be done through close coordination with Egypt and, if possible, with the PA as well. As a result, Hamas may realize that it is in its best interest to comply with Egypt's terms for a ceasefire and allow the PA's integration into the Gaza Strip.

In any event, Israel should put forward an approach that benefits the population of Gaza, by easing restrictions on the import and export of commodities and by supporting economic and infrastructure projects. This should, however, be conditioned upon the PA assuming responsibility for the crossings as well as for the rehabilitation of the Gaza Strip, and the establishment of a mechanism to prevent Hamas from regaining power. An agreement to establish a seaport operated by the PA and the international community would be one example for the second stage of Gaza rehabilitation. Israel has previously agreed to building a seaport in Gaza, in the frameworks of the Interim Agreement and deliberations regarding a Permanent Status Agreement, conditioned upon an effective security supervisory system to prevent smuggling weapons into Gaza through the port. In the context of the Israeli disengagement from Gaza (August 2005), Israel had agreed to discuss the establishment of a port with appropriate security measures in place (goods would be shipped to Gaza on secured light vessels following security inspection at a nearby port in Larnaca or El Arish). A seaport in Gaza is advantageous for Israel toward removal of its responsibility for the economic and humanitarian situation in Gaza. The port will facilitate economic growth, and should the Palestinian side fail to implement the agreement, Israel will have the right to close the port and impose a maritime siege. Providing the PA with these benefits will weaken Hamas and make obvious to the civilian population in Gaza that Hamas' renewal of armed attacks against Israel would have a direct negative impact on Gaza and civilian life there.

