



INSS Insight No. 590, August 15, 2014

The US Administration on Israel's Military Activity in Operation Protective Edge: Fluctuating Positions

Zaki Shalom

Since the outset of the latest military conflict in the Gaza Strip, the Obama administration has taken a clear and unequivocal position in support of Israel's right to defend itself. In the early stages of the operation, when the main threat to Israel was rocket fire, the administration asked Israel to exercise restraint and limit its activity to aerial responses and refrain from a ground campaign. Once the tunnels surfaced as a concrete threat, the administration again emphasized Israel's right to defend itself, but asked Israel to limit its response to removal of the missile and tunnel threats. Following criticism against the administration for failing to express its thorough support for Israel, Secretary of State Kerry – in at least one instance – took care to reinforce the legitimacy of Israel's actions by stating that they were “appropriate and legitimate.”

At the same time, administration officials repeatedly expressed their deep concern about the severe damage suffered by the Gaza civilian population during Operation Protective Edge. The hardships sustained by Israel's civilian population were mentioned occasionally, but the administration focused most of its attention on the suffering of “innocent people” in the Gaza Strip. Given the fact that administration was quite aware that Israel was making every effort to avoid harming the civilian population, the emphatic public comments about the suffering of Gaza residents can be interpreted as an attempt to rein in Israel's military freedom of action in the Gaza Strip. On at least one occasion, there was an unmistakable message by President Obama to Israel to ease the military pressure on Gaza, reflected in his assertion that Israel had already caused significant damage to Hamas.

More than once President Obama linked the conflict in the Gaza Strip to the failure of the peace process. While not entirely explicitly, his statements bore a concealed message that although Hamas is responsible for the current tension, Israel is not free of blame for it. For his part, the Secretary of State was quoted expressing a negative attitude toward Israel and its military campaign; his remark, “When is everybody going to come to their senses?” put the actions of Israel and Hamas on the same footing. Finally, it is

worthwhile noting the somewhat unconventional, not to mention uncomplimentary remark by US Deputy National Security Adviser for Strategic Communication Ben Rhodes, who conveyed clearly that Israel was not doing all it could to avoid unnecessary civilian fatalities in the Gaza Strip. As evidence, he cited the actions of the US military in Afghanistan, saying, "I think you can always do more. The US military does that in Afghanistan. We go to great lengths. But we believe that in densely populated areas like this, you have to go the extra mile to avoid loss of civilian life."

Following Hamas' Violation of the Ceasefire Agreement

Following the collapse of the ceasefire with the kidnapping and killing by Hamas on August 1, 2014, the administration's attitude toward Israel's military campaign in the Gaza Strip adopted a more positive tone. The US condemned Hamas' actions, terming them an "outrageous violation" of the ceasefire agreement. The blame for the new situation was placed unequivocally on Hamas. The administration stated that the understandings included in the ceasefire gave Israel the right to continue its destruction of the tunnels. It affirmed that Israel was "entirely right" in insisting on this need, although it also advised that Israel should not advance its forces further toward populated areas.

Administration officials made it clear that if the Palestinians were serious about solving the crisis, they should return the kidnapped soldier "immediately and unconditionally." The President further stressed that the US was expressing its support for Israel not only in words, but also in deeds. For example, the US awarded \$225 million toward expansion of the Iron Dome system. The US said it would help Israel guarantee its ability to defend its population as much as possible, and was maintaining close and ongoing contact with Israel at all levels.

While the President reiterated that the harm to civilians has to "weigh on our conscience," for the first time since the conflict began he made an effort to make it explicitly clear that he was well aware of the dilemmas facing Israel in its military operation. Referring to the firing of missiles at Israel from inside civilian areas, He said, "The actions on the part of Hamas are incredibly irresponsible." The Secretary of State also described Hamas as behaving in a "most unbelievably shocking manner." The President emphasized that the reality created did not deter the US from continuing its efforts to bring about a ceasefire, but that this task was now made more difficult than before by the fact that both Israel and the international community could no longer trust the promises of Hamas and its ability to control all the rival factions in the Gaza Strip.

It is quite possible that the change in tone by administration leaders was prompted by their great anger at Hamas for so crudely violating an express commitment given to the US administration in the context of the ceasefire. It is therefore difficult to assess whether, and for how long, the administration will continue showing similar empathy for

Israel's military actions in the Gaza Strip. The administration's sharp reaction to the deaths of Palestinians in the UNRWA building in the Gaza Strip ("disgraceful shelling") likely indicates that the turnaround in the remarks by administration leaders concerning Israel's military campaign in the Gaza Strip was short-lived. The administration quickly issued a condemnation, putting the blame for the harm to civilians on Israel, without waiting for the result of the IDF inquiry. In addition, the administration stated explicitly, "The suspicion that militants are operating nearby does not justify strikes that put at risk the lives of so many innocent civilians." The administration is certainly well aware that such a formula gravely limits Israel military freedom of action.

Conclusion

The indiscriminate rocket and missile fire at cities in Israel, the discovery of tunnels posing a grave threat to the Israeli communities near the Gaza Strip, the fact that the Israeli government showed restraint and repeated willingness to accept a ceasefire throughout the conflict, and the broad support for Israel in both the Congress and among US public opinion led the Obama administration to support steadfastly, continuously, and unequivocally Israel's right to defend itself against Hamas. At the same time, the administration qualified its support of Israel by demanding that the military operation be restricted to removal of the threat posed by the missiles and tunnels, and that severe harm to the civilian population in the Gaza Strip be avoided.

Presumably the administration's position was to a large extent dictated by its need to avoid confrontation with its respective allies in the region: Turkey and Qatar on the one hand, and Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Israel on the other. It was clear to the administration that if it wanted to maintain its status as a relevant element in the efforts to achieve a settlement, it had to balance its support for Israel's right to defend itself with serious reservations about the harm to civilians in the Gaza Strip.

It should be noted that this is the first military conflict involving Israel where the US is not playing a dominant role in bringing it to its end. This situation is to a great extent a result of the erosion in US standing in the Middle East over the past two years, and there is no doubt that the administration finds this a worrisome development. The administration's efforts to be involved in the efforts for securing an agreement more than once caused it embarrassment. Gradually, however, the administration has come to recognize that Egypt, not the US, is the leading party in achieving an agreement. As such, it remains for the US to minimize the damage to its own status as much as possible.