

The Israeli public and the Gaza war: supporting the armed effort, doubting the strategic outcome

By Yossi Alpher

■ Executive summary

Overwhelming Israeli public support for the war in Gaza derives from a number of unique factors. Primary among these are the nature of Hamas as a hostile Islamist movement, the fact that its aggression this time affected the vast majority of Israeli civilians, and the perception of unique backing for Israel's war effort provided by key actors in Saudi Arabia and particularly Egypt.

However, the war's outcome is liable to disappoint most Israelis, insofar as it reflects the absence of a viable Israeli strategy for dealing not only with Hamas in Gaza but also with the Palestinian issue in general.

By late August 2014, after more than a month of war between Israel and Gaza-based Hamas and Islamic Jihad, it was increasingly clear to the Israeli public that ceasefire negotiations in Cairo would not generate the strategic outcome the government of Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu had led it to expect. Even many government ministers were vocally disappointed, and discord within the governing coalition was growing.

The disillusionment was all the more palpable in view of the strategic backdrop. Operation Protective Edge found Israelis still supporting a two-state solution with the Palestinians but sceptical of its feasibility and therefore not surprised at the failure, just months earlier, of a U.S.-sponsored peace process. Israelis were understandably dismayed by the anarchy and Islamist extremism sweeping the region from Libya to Iraq, including in Gaza. The public had just mourned the brutal murder of three teenage yeshiva students abducted near a West Bank settlement. In the course of the search for the three students, hundreds of Hamas supporters had been rounded up in the West Bank, while elements within the dominant religious and secular right wing of Israeli politics increasingly preached xenophobia and intolerance toward Arab citizens of Israel, not to mention Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. Ultimately, the violent revenge murder of an East Jerusalem Arab boy by Jewish extremists should not have surprised anyone.

These events led up to the outbreak in early July of yet another war with Hamas in Gaza. The public support the war generated is particularly significant when viewed against the backdrop of earlier wars. After all, Israel has moved from fighting what were perceived to be existential wars of survival against coalitions of Arab state enemies in its early decades (1948, 1967, 1973) to more controversial "wars of choice" against hostile non-state actors implanted in ungovernable neighbouring territory (1982, 2006, 2008–9, 2012), most of which generated highly problematic outcomes.

Why the sweeping support for Operation Protective Edge of July–August 2014?

One major factor is the percentage of Israeli civilians directly threatened by the enemy. The Second Lebanon War of summer 2006 against Hizbullah featured rocket attacks that targeted civilians in the northern third of the country – the first time the Israeli civilian rear had been significantly attacked in war since 1948. The 2008–2009 effort against Hamas in Gaza was launched largely because rocket fire from the Strip had begun to reach beyond the lightly populated Gaza periphery to Ashkelon, with its population of 100,000, while the 2012 conflict for the first time involved very limited rocket fire on Tel Aviv and Beersheva. In the Gaza war of July–August 2014, Hamas's rockets targeted fully two-thirds of the country, including the main

population centres of greater Tel Aviv (“Gush Dan”), Jerusalem, Beersheva and Rishon LeZion. In other words, in this conflict most Israelis experienced the threat of enemy attack at first hand for the first time, thereby generating a major incentive to support the use of whatever military means were necessary to counter the rockets.

True, the Iron Dome anti-rocket missile system provided an effective defence against incoming rockets, but it was not enough to prevent disruption of normal life and in some cases major trauma. Besides, millions of Israelis, for the first time, internalised the Islamist threat: Hamas, with its virulently anti-Semitic charter, was trying to kill them. In parallel, the public was reassured by the fact that, unlike in 2006, the government of Israel had gone to war after considerable delay, having issued multiple warnings to Hamas to cease its rocket fire and having invoked measures to avoid Palestinian civilian casualties under extreme combat conditions and despite Hamas’s persistent reliance on civilians as human shields. The perception that Netanyahu and the defence minister, Moshe Yaalon, were acting cautiously and responsibly helped rally the public behind their decision-making.

Furthermore, within a week of the commencement of fighting, the public confronted a new Hamas threat: more than 30 attack tunnels dug under the Gaza border fence, with the apparent objective of launching mass terrorist raids on Israeli civilians living in border kibbutzim. Video clips of Hamas commandos emerging from below ground into Israeli territory seemingly communicated a primordial threat. The flight of many of the kibbutz residents, who were also harried incessantly by mortar fire of which there was no early warning, presented yet another new and frightening spectre with menacing overtones for the Zionist ethos of settling the land: the evacuation of civilians from pioneering border communities inside Israel.

At the regional level, Israelis began to internalise the recognition that, in a largely dysfunctional Middle East state system, the country was becoming surrounded by Sunni and Shiite Islamist enemies bent not on peace and coexistence but on the country’s destruction, thereby rendering this war a kind of prototype for a new, long-term struggle against uncompromising enemies. Anti-Semitic acts in Europe linked to the war reinforced the perception that the issue was extremist hatred of Jews per se. At the same time, prominent Egyptian and even Saudi spokespersons were openly encouraging and supportive of the Israeli war effort, presenting the possibility that Israeli success against Hamas would, for the first time, cement a regional coalition that included Israel.

The Obama administration and the U.S. Congress were broadly supportive of Israel’s motives, and European Union foreign ministers endorsed Netanyahu’s war aim of demilitarising the Gaza Strip. Israel (and the West Bank-based Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO)) willingly submitted to Cairo’s demand to monopolise ceasefire

efforts in recognition of Egypt’s support as well as its geopolitical centrality to future Israeli–Gazan relations.

Taken together, these developments generated the atmosphere of an existential war with important regional ramifications. Some 95% of Israeli Jews provided sweeping support for a ground offensive inside Gaza aimed at finding and eradicating the tunnels, no matter what the price in Israel Defense Forces (IDF) casualties and Gazan civilian losses.

Even as the war effort became increasingly ugly in terms of Palestinian civilian losses and international unease or outright condemnation, domestic Israeli and Israeli–Palestinian politics reinforced the public’s readiness to support it. Netanyahu found himself balancing two opposing forces. One was extremist and pro-settler coalition elements, including from within his own party, who advocated reconquering the entire Strip and physically eliminating Hamas. The other was the Zionist centre (also in his coalition) and left, including the opposition Labor Party and initially even Meretz. They recognised in Hamas an anti-peace actor and saw an opportunity to achieve by force the political reunification of Gaza with the West Bank under a PLO-led unity government that would be far better situated to command international support for renewed two-state solution negotiations. Here, for example, is the former Meretz leader Haim Oron, a veteran peace campaigner whose son and grandson were both in combat, explaining to *Haaretz* why most of the Zionist left supports the war despite the heavy damage and casualties inflicted on Gaza (translated and abridged by the present author: “Even just wars do not purify all the terrible things that happen in them ... And anyone who does not experience this and understand it all the way is somewhere else and has arranged for himself a different value system from mine.”

Understanding the eventual outcome

Why, then, did such a roundly supported and cautiously prosecuted war effort lead by late August to a seemingly endless round of ceasefires, ceasefire violations and hapless four-sided negotiations (Egypt, Israel, Hamas/ Islamic Jihad and PLO/Fateh) in Cairo? Why was it increasingly clear that the outcome would leave Israel with nothing approaching a decisive victory against Hamas? Indeed, it seemed that the results would be yet another tenuous Gaza ceasefire, yet another international investigation of alleged war crimes and, despite Israel’s rather unique readiness to supply its enemy with fuel, food and medical supplies in wartime, growing Western and United Nations anger over a humanitarian emergency in Gaza.

Israel was now reluctantly prepared to accept a Palestinian unity government that Hamas itself is likely to tolerate only temporarily (note that Fateh is already accusing Hamas of having incarcerated Fateh activists in the Gaza Strip and even executing them during the war). It was increasingly

troubled by instances of domestic intolerance and incitement incubated by the war. And it saw no clear way forward in deterring the growing Islamist threat on its borders that Hamas represents. The sense shared by many Israelis that they had no alternative but to fight back aggressively against Hamas – by late August, with the conflict dragging on, the public was increasingly suspicious of Netanyahu's much-praised caution and prepared to consider a major military offensive deep into the Strip – and the consequent Israeli anger over international double standards in judging the war effort may be understandable, but they do not begin to explain the paradox of this war's outcome.

The most compelling explanation begins with the fact that a succession of Israeli governments has had no coherent strategy for dealing with Hamas in Gaza. Should Israel offer to talk to Hamas? At least until now Hamas has not agreed to talk to Israel, and Egypt and the PLO would resent such an initiative on Israel's part. Reoccupy the Gaza Strip? Toward what end: more occupation and direct responsibility for nearly 2 million Palestinians? Coexist quietly with Hamas? For that to work, Israel must find a way to coexist with a Palestinian state anchored in the West Bank, an option ostensibly endorsed by Netanyahu but sabotaged by his ideology and settlement policies.

Without a compelling strategy, tactics go only so far, especially when hard intelligence regarding Hamas's leadership and intentions seems to be lacking. Accordingly, Israel's professed goals in this war changed constantly and erratically, from "quiet in return for quiet", to eliminating the tunnels, to demilitarising the Gaza Strip, to hitting Hamas hard but leaving it in power lest more extreme Islamists replace it and, finally, to accepting Mahmoud Abbas's Palestinian unity government as a potential instrument for policing and monitoring Gaza's borders.

Without a compelling strategy, and more pertinently without an obviously compelling victory over Hamas, it becomes increasingly difficult for the government and the public to justify either Israel's own painful military losses or the far more extensive civilian losses inflicted on the Gazan population, even if, ultimately, the IDF's legal team will supply persuasive explanations for them in terms of Hamas's own blatant violations of the rules of war.

And without a compelling strategy, Netanyahu is increasingly hard put to justify his actions to a sceptical Obama administration – an administration that the Israeli prime minister in any case ignores at his peril in favour of more friendly Republicans in Congress.

True, the Obama team itself has made serious mistakes in this war. An abortive early attempt by the U.S. Secretary of State, John Kerry, to arrange a ceasefire by talking to the Hamas supporters Turkey and Qatar, thereby bypassing Egypt, was dismissed by Israelis as well as Egyptians and Saudis as yet another instance of the U.S. misunderstanding emerging regional dynamics. But Netanyahu would be well advised to conclude the war – whether by agreement in Cairo, a de facto ceasefire, a more decisive military achievement or a United Nations initiative – on conditions that receive that administration's blessing. U.S. support is virtually as important to the Israeli public as are peace agreements.

It is not easy to formulate a workable strategy for dealing with the non-state Islamist enemies on Israel's borders. After all, they do not play by the "rules" of war or of international relations. That is why sometimes even a bumbling war effort proves far more productive than it initially seems: if the 2006 war against Hizbullah is anything to judge by, the damage inflicted on the Gaza Strip could yet generate years of deterrence and quiet, with Islamist leaders fearing to show their faces in public. In retrospect, the public may still embrace the outcome of Netanyahu's current effort.

Yet whether or not that happens, this war against Palestinians has not moved Israel any closer to resolving its greatest strategic threat: the growing ideological/demographic danger to Israel as a Jewish and democratic state. Such a state is what Netanyahu and the political right profess to aspire to; they have no idea how to get there. ■

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