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Military Lessons for Hamas from Operation Protective Edge

Gabi Siboni and A.G.

Hamas emerged bruised and battered from the 50 days of fighting in Operation Protective Edge, and programs for reconstruction in the Gaza Strip have not progressed at the pace expected by the leadership. The severe economic situation and the ensuing humanitarian crisis in Gaza are liable to be a catalyst for public protest that could threaten the Hamas government. Furthermore, as of now no political horizon is in sight, and the armed struggle against Israel remains a key element in the organization's political Islamic ideology. As such, the development of another round of warfare between Israel and Hamas appears to be only a matter of time. The return to center stage of Mohammed Deif, commander of Hamas' military wing, increases the urgency of the questions concerning the organization's operations in a future conflict with Israel.

There are already grounds for assuming that in the next round of conflict, Hamas will be better prepared and more dangerous than it has been until now, because analysis of past operations and learning the lessons of a previous round of fighting are a clear part of the organization's *modus operandi*. This element should be considered when assessing whether Israel's primary goal in the most recent conflict with Hamas – establishing long term deterrence against the organization – was actually achieved. It is already evident that the organization is preparing carefully for the next round, rebuilding its force and military infrastructure. Hamas is unlikely to change its doctrine of warfare dramatically in preparation for the next conflict, but it is presumably concentrating on improving and strengthening its capabilities, while implementing the lessons it has learned since the ceasefire in August 2014. This article evaluates the conclusions Hamas stands to draw from Operation Protective Edge, particularly the military aspects of force building and operation, in an attempt to assess how well the organization is prepared for a future conflict.

Since the end of the conflict in the summer of 2014, Hamas has concentrated on rebuilding its system of offensive tunnels from the Gaza Strip into Israel. The

Dr. Gabi Siboni is a senior research fellow and head of the Military and Strategic Affairs Program at INSS. A.G. is at the Prime Minister's office.

organization's leadership realized that the number of tunnels it had built and the extent to which they were used came as a surprise to Israel. For this reason, the offensive tunnels became a key element of Hamas' fighting doctrine. In the end, the yield from the tunnels during Operation Protective Edge was not directly proportionate to the decisive weight Hamas had assigned to them and their potential damage was not fully realized; their most significant achievement relates to the functional survival of the command echelon. Nonetheless, the organization will almost certainly rebuild the damaged tunnels and continue to dig new ones, given that almost all of Hamas' senior chain command and political leaders survived Operation Protective Edge. Hamas will presumably try to surprise Israel again using the tunnels in order to exact a heavy price. The efforts might focus on a small number of axes of potentially high effectiveness in order to achieve a supreme Hamas objective – kidnapping live soldiers or civilians. The infrastructure tunnels dug as an extensive network throughout the Gaza Strip are also a key element in Hamas' ability to withstand a prolonged conflict.

Hamas and the other armed groups in the Gaza Strip launched over 4,500 rockets of various ranges against Israel during Operation Protective Edge. Hamas believes that even if the effectiveness of the Iron Dome system prevented large numbers of casualties among the civilian population in Israel, the very necessity of sending millions of Israeli citizens to shelters continually on a daily basis and the disruption of their daily lives constituted an important achievement. Its ability to disrupt Israel's civil aviation (foreign airlines suspended flights for two days during Operation Protective Edge) and the resulting potential economic and morale damage to Israel are also likely to encourage rocket production efforts, including increasing the number produced, improving their accuracy, and lengthening their range. The frequent trial launches in the Gaza Strip support this assessment. In addition, and as a result of the increased number of Iron Dome batteries, Hamas realizes that in the future, it must disperse its launch targets as much as possible in order to force Israel to spread out the batteries deployed and focus on defense of vital infrastructure, thereby increasing Hamas' chances of penetrating the defense envelope. To this end, Hamas might solicit assistance from Hizbollah forces in Lebanon or Syria, Palestinian organizations in southern Lebanon, or extremist Islamic organizations in the Sinai Peninsula, which with their rocket arsenals could open additional fronts against Israel.

During Operation Protective Edge, Hamas employed a variety of tactics prematurely, but presumably these tactics will be improved and used again, this time with more effectiveness. Such tactics include commando incursions into Israeli territory and the use of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), whose main purpose is to create a conscious deterrent among the population in Israel. At least some of these operations might also cause casualties or property damage. Indeed, use of UAVs is one of the areas in which Hamas can make its biggest advances, particularly given the ongoing technological

developments in this field. Iran, which has advanced capabilities in the development and production of UAVs, has already granted Hamas assistance in this area, and this aid is expected to continue. UAVs can constitute an alternative to rocket fire, and even increase the damage through “suicide” UAVs propelled by manual or automatic guidance. The organization is also expected to make efforts to procure land based anti-ship missiles and improve its air defense system, even though the Israel Air Force is clearly superior, because if Hamas succeeds in downing an airplane or helicopter or in damaging an Israeli naval vessel, it will obtain the victory photograph it has long been seeking.

The recent rapprochement between Iran and Hamas has an additional facet: Hizbollah. Hamas and Hizbollah have learned from one another for years: Hamas implemented many of Hizbollah’s successful processes, while for its part Hizbollah is likely to study Hamas’ insights about the IDF’s military moves and methods of operation during Operation Protective Edge. Following Operation Protective Edge, lessons will likely be traded among Iran, Hizbollah, and Hamas. Indeed, Hamas’ units and tactics in Operation Protective Edge were more effective than in previous conflicts with the IDF. Together with the use of advanced weapons, operations by the organization’s military wing indicated an understanding that even a standard weapon and basic methods of warfare could be extremely effective and deadly. The use of snipers, machine guns, and mortar shells or improvised bombs and mines on dense battlefields, combined with attempts to draw IDF forces into a killing zone, succeeded in exacting a high number of victims from Israel – more than in any other conflict between the parties in the preceding eight years.

An effective media strategy has been integrated in Hamas’ military concept, described as the “victim doctrine,” based on using civilians as human shields. This consists of shooting rockets and weapons from within densely populated areas in order to force Israel to respond, thereby hitting the non-involved Palestinian population. This strategy is designed to generate political, public relations, and international legal pressure on Israel, detract from its legitimacy to use force, and isolate it with accusations of using disproportionate force. It is almost certain that Hamas’ success in delivering its “victim” message during Operation Protective Edge will lead it to behave in similar fashion in the next conflict as well, despite the suffering and enormous destruction this method brings on the Gaza population.

Despite the heavy price paid by Hamas in Operation Protective Edge, it is not wasting any time preparing for the next war. For the organization, war against Israel is a tool for strategic change to entrench its rule in the Gaza Strip and establish itself as a key player in the Israeli-Palestinian arena and surpass the power base of the Palestinian Authority (PA), headed by Fatah and Mahmoud Abbas.

In order for Israel to postpone the next conflict with Hamas for as long as possible, two main efforts are necessary. One is to prevent the organization’s arming itself with

standard and advanced weapons and raw materials liable to be used to manufacture such weapons. The second is the economic lever, i.e., improving the dire economic and humanitarian situation prevailing in the Gaza Strip. Easing the plight of the local population will reinforce Hamas' sense of governmental sustainability in the area. In the absence of a concrete threat to its rule, it will likely be in no hurry to pick a fight. In this context, however, the unstable and hostile relations between Hamas and the PA, especially the dispute between them concerning the distribution of the money promised for rebuilding the Gaza Strip, play a key role in blocking any progress toward the vital reconstruction.

