

Operations Cast Lead, Pillar of Defense, and Protective Edge: A Comparative Review

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In 2001, armed groups operating within the Gaza Strip began firing high trajectory weapons at the settlements of the western Negev. At first, they used improvised low power and relatively inaccurate Qassam rockets and mortars. However, as time passed they were able to increase the types of weapons at their disposal, a result of more sophisticated independent production efforts and the smuggling of weapons into the Gaza Strip. Today the Gaza Strip boasts a wide variety of high trajectory firing capabilities, including mortar shells and powerful long range rockets. In addition, efforts by terrorist groups to breach the Gaza Strip's isolation have produced a widespread tunnel industry, which was initially concentrated in the Rafah region and fueled by both economic motivations and the need to smuggle weapons into the Gaza Strip. After recognizing the potential of these tunnels, terrorist elements began digging offensive tunnels toward Israel with the aim of facilitating abductions and terrorist attacks in the settlements near the border fence.

The terrorist organizations' pace of armament with rocket launching weaponry increased substantially in the Gaza Strip after Israel's unilateral disengagement in 2005 and Hamas' seizure of power two years later. This was the background for the three broad scale operations launched by Israel in the Gaza sector: Operation Cast Lead (December 2008-January 2009), Operation Pillar of Defense (November 2012), and Operation Protective Edge (July-August 2014). This article undertakes a comparison of the three operations, focusing on their strategic background and an analysis of the operational military campaign, in which Hamas increased its use of the "victim doctrine," which aims to damage Israel's status in the international

arena by maximizing Israel's injury to the non-combatant civilian population of the Gaza Strip. The article concludes by presenting a number of insights regarding the measures necessary to contend with the security threat emanating from the Gaza Strip.

The Strategic Context

Hamas rose to power in the Gaza Strip in the wake of democratic elections. After losing all hope in the corrupt leadership of Fatah, the Palestinian public, at least in the days leading up to the elections, regarded Hamas as a force that could govern in a more honest manner. Hamas' violent seizure of power in the Gaza Strip left the movement, led by radical fundamentalist Islamic ideology, to contend with the combined challenge of asserting political control over a political-territorial entity on the one hand, and preserving regional relevance as a resistance movement in the Palestinian arena on the other.

The escalation of rocket fire originating from the Gaza Strip in late 2008 led Israel to launch Operation Cast Lead. During this conflict, Hamas, which had started to consolidate its hold in the area, was provided with a strategic rear by Egypt and Syria,¹ which were then on the eve of the wave of unrest that would subsequently sweep through the Arab world. Hamas received more substantial support from Iran, which sought in this manner to influence developments in the Arab world, especially the Israeli-Palestinian arena. Iran assisted Hamas by smuggling weapons (Grad rockets, anti-tank missiles, and explosives) into the Gaza Strip, providing it with technological knowledge that facilitated the production of explosive devices and rockets, assisting in training on Iranian soil, transferring funds totaling hundreds of millions of dollars each year, and providing political backing against Israel and the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority.² This provision of aid was facilitated by taking advantage of the failed Egyptian administration of the Sinai Peninsula during the rule of President Husni Mubarak.

Operation Cast Lead was the first of a series of confrontations between Israel and Hamas and the other armed groups operating in the Gaza Strip. Hamas regarded both the recommendations of the Goldstone Commission, which was established by the UN Human Rights Council to investigate Israel's actions during the operation, and the harsh international criticism of Israel's policies toward the Gaza Strip as a significant achievement. The continuing erosion in international public opinion of Israel's legitimacy to respond to rocket fire from the Gaza Strip has deepened the Hamas

leadership's understanding of the potential of utilizing civilian casualties in the Gaza Strip as a powerful means in the balance of power between the resistance movement and Israel.³

Operation Pillar of Defense was launched while Hamas was riding on a high wave of popular support throughout the Arab world. The revolution in Egypt and the rise to power of the Muslim Brotherhood that followed imbued Hamas with greater confidence. Egypt, under the rule of Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohamed Morsi, Turkey, and Qatar competed with one another in their support for Hamas in an effort to increase their influence in the Sunni sphere. Hamas' relations with Iran entered a period of crisis, and the Islamic organization's relations with the Egyptian government intensified to the point of dependence on Egypt. In these circumstances, Egypt was able to bring about a quick end to the fighting and facilitate the formulation of understandings that allowed both Israel and Hamas to claim significant achievements. In the wake of the conflict, Israel enjoyed quiet and Hamas was provided with an opportunity not only to stabilize its rule but also to tighten its relations with Qatar and benefit from Doha's generous military aid. This period, however, did not last long, and ended when the Muslim Brotherhood was forced out of power in Egypt by a military coup and General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi was elected president. On the eve of Operation Protective Edge, Hamas found itself isolated in the Arab world. The economic system it had developed through the tunnels in the Rafah region was almost completely paralyzed by the countermeasures implemented by the Egyptian military. This sense of isolation and the desire to change the problematic position in which it now found itself is what led Hamas to the most recent round of fighting.

The 2014 campaign in Gaza was also influenced by another change in the array of powers in the Middle East: the growing threat posed by the Islamic State organization in Syria and Iraq, which set the backdrop for the emergence of a new American-led coalition aimed at destroying the group. In this context, the United States and the countries of the West suddenly found themselves on the side not only of Saudi Arabia and Jordan, but also of Iran, Hizbollah, and even the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria. This phenomenon, which may not guarantee the restoration of Washington's relevance to the events in the Middle East, has pushed Hamas and the problem of the Gaza Strip onto the sidelines of the international agenda, thus exacerbating its isolation even further.

The Operative Campaign

It is difficult to determine whether the fighting by Hamas and other Palestinian groups during Operation Protective Edge was the product of advance planning, particularly as neither side appeared interested in the conflict. However, as has happened many times before, Israel and Hamas once again found themselves in the midst of a protracted round of fighting. Observation of Hamas' modes of warfare since Operation Cast Lead reveals a systematic process of learning. During the period between Operation Pillar of Defense and Operation Protective Edge, Hamas acted with restraint. At the same time, however, it increased construction of the military infrastructure within the Gaza Strip and systematically attempted to carry out attacks in the West Bank.⁴ This process was marked by a combined approach to warfare consisting of two primary elements.

The first element was an offensive effort, which aimed at striking at Israel through two means: rocket fire and cross-border attacks by way of the offensive tunnels. Maintaining rocket firing capability was facilitated by a defensive effort including the concealment of underground launchers in densely populated civilian environments. These two offensive elements were not intended to achieve decision of any kind but rather to damage the fabric of life of Israeli citizens and exert pressure on the Israeli government to ease the restrictions on the passage of goods and people into the Gaza Strip. Hamas and the other groups operating in Gaza also made use of their short range mortar firing capabilities to undermine the sense of security of the residents of communities located close to the border fence.

This offensive effort rested on two developments. The first was recognition of the fact that the firing of rockets at Ben Gurion airport had the potential to disrupt international air travel to Israel. This speculation was confirmed by a rocket that was aimed at the airport and was not intercepted by the Iron Dome system. This episode prompted a number of airlines to cancel their flights to and from Israel for a few days. The second was the understanding that mortar fire on the settlements along the Gaza perimeter exerts pressure on Israel, as unlike rocket fire, mortar fire from such a short range does not allow residents sufficient warning and cannot be intercepted by the Iron Dome system.

In the process of building a systematic fighting force, Hamas increased the power of its rocket fire effort over its previous capabilities. This was reflected on a number of levels. In terms of weaponry, Hamas expanded

both its long range rocket launching capabilities and the quantity and variety of the rockets themselves. In defense of its rocket capability, Hamas and the other organizations operating in the Gaza Strip developed a concept of warfare and defense based on the use of underground spaces to protect its forces and its rocket launching equipment, as well as increased use of the civilian population as human shields for its mortar and rocket launching sites. This enabled them to maintain substantial firepower even in the final days of the campaign and, at the same time, identify the weak spots of the Iron Dome system at close range and fire mortar shells at the communities located in close proximity to the fence.

The undermining of the legitimacy of Israel's right to use force in the wake of Operation Cast Lead led to Hamas' development of the "victim doctrine," the second of its primary warfare elements. This doctrine seeks to provoke Israeli action that results in injury to civilians and damage to civilian and international installations. It is facilitated by positioning rocket and mortar launching weaponry in installations of this sort and in civilian areas, and aims to deepen Israel's isolation in the international arena. The greater the civilian injury caused by Israel, the more effective the effort to legitimize Hamas and delegitimize Israel. During Operation Protective Edge, Hamas greatly intensified its use of the "victim doctrine," as manifested in the extensive exposure of uninvolved civilians to IDF air strikes. Rockets were also fired from humanitarian sites in which civilians had taken refuge. Employment of the "victim doctrine" is effectively illustrated in photos showing rockets being fired from inside schools and international organization facilities.

There is nothing new about Hamas and other armed groups launching rockets from civilian areas. However, this mode of operation was upgraded during Operation Protective Edge. Hamas learned the lessons of Operation Cast Lead and Operation Pillar of Defense and increased its use of civilian areas. The installation of rocket launching weaponry on the grounds of sites of international organizations operating in the Gaza Strip requires advance preparation, including digging and weaponry transport and installation. It is difficult to imagine these preparations being carried out without the personnel at these sites taking notice. Pressure may have been exerted on such individuals to prevent opposition to preparations made by Hamas at their sites.⁵ Indeed, until the final week of fighting, the IDF had difficulty striking at Hamas' senior command echelon, as its members remained protected underground, where they operated in isolation from their surroundings.

Thus it is difficult to assess the extent to which senior Hamas officials and commanders were aware of the scope of the destruction and loss of life underway in the Gaza Strip – or in other words, of the cost exacted by the “victim doctrine.”⁶



Rocket launching site within an UNRWA school



Rocket launching sites within schools



Rocket launching site within a diplomatic facility and a Red Cross medical facility [sic]

In contrast, the IDF’s operational concept underwent no fundamental change since Operation Cast Lead. It was based on firing, including precise standoff firepower against previously selected targets and the intensification of damage to incidental targets. In addition to weapons fire, the IDF maintained the readiness of ground forces to undertake a limited ground incursion into the Gaza Strip, with the aim of destroying the military infrastructure of Hamas and the other armed groups operating in the Strip and of reaching a ceasefire. During Operation Cast Lead, these forces were sent into action after the Israeli airpower campaign had been fully exhausted and failed to bring about a significant reduction in Hamas’ rocket fire. During Operation Pillar of Defense, on the other hand, the Israeli ground force was never utilized due to the relatively quick achievement of understandings and a ceasefire, stemming from Cairo’s influence on Hamas.

In recent years IDF force buildup has been characterized by an increased emphasis on air fire capabilities and target intelligence. These areas have received the majority of resources – quite naturally, at the expense of ground maneuvering, which was left behind with limited independent precision fire lethality and capability. At the same time, development of armament with heavy platforms (such as the Merkava and the Namer) and advanced defenses proceeded sluggishly due to budgetary difficulties. The IDF's operational plans constituted a direct continuation of these processes, as demonstrated during Operation Protective Edge. The campaign opened with air strikes that were significantly larger in scope than previous operations, as a result of the improvement of IDF intelligence capabilities pertaining to planned targets and targets identified during battle. Hamas and the other groups, however, maintained long range rocket fire and short range mortar fire capabilities throughout the entire course of the hostilities. They were able to do this by making extensive use of the “victim doctrine,” which made it difficult for the IDF to strike at launching sites located in densely populated civilian areas. After a number of attempts by Hamas to enter into Israel using attack tunnels, the IDF (belatedly, in the eyes of some) initiated ground maneuvers aimed at destroying the attack tunnels.

During the final week of fighting, when the Israeli ground forces were withdrawn from the Strip, the air campaign resumed its major role in the campaign, which intensified as the IDF lifted some of its self-imposed restrictions. This facilitated more extensive destruction of Hamas' military infrastructure and rocket launching sites. It can be assumed that this action was one factor that compelled Hamas to agree to a ceasefire according to the original Egyptian outline, which the Hamas leadership had previously rejected.

The Operative and Strategic Balance of the Campaign

At the time of this writing, it is difficult to assess the results of Operation Protective Edge. Past experience teaches that such assessments require long term perspective and must be measured based on the improvement in Israel's strategic position over time, and not on declarations and populist discourses of victory and defeat on both sides. Nonetheless, the results of the campaign invite comparisons with the Second Lebanon War and previous rounds of fighting in the Gaza region.

When the Second Lebanon War ended, the Israeli public perceived it as a defeat and a missed opportunity.⁷ Nonetheless, it was followed by a relatively long period of quiet in northern Israel – one of the longest since the establishment of the state. Operation Cast Lead, in contrast, concluded with a unilateral ceasefire and was seen at the time as a military victory in the struggle against Hamas, although Hamas and the other groups operating in the Gaza Strip continued their buildup and their rocket fire from the Gaza Strip almost without a break until Operation Pillar of Defense. And, as became clear, the understandings that facilitated the ceasefire that marked the conclusion of Operation Pillar of Defense also did little to provide Israel with an extended period of calm.

With the requisite caution, a number of insights gained in the wake of Operation Protective Edge that are indicative of an improvement in Israel's position vis-à-vis the challenges posed by the Gaza Strip can be suggested. The first is the fact that the international community has come to understand the seriousness of the threat posed by radical fundamentalist Islam. Internalization of the danger posed by the Islamic State organization's current offensive in Iraq and Syria has had an impact on general attitudes toward Hamas and the other terrorist groups operating in the Strip, although the groups are by no means identical. In this way, the unprecedented call by EU foreign ministers for the disarmament of all terrorist groups in the Gaza Strip may have been influenced by developments in Iraq and Syria.⁸

Second, during and following Operation Protective Edge, Hamas found itself isolated in the Sunni arena with the exception of its relationship with Qatar and Turkey, whose influence is limited in any event. The hostility of Egypt has also deepened Hamas' isolation and serves as a lever for pressuring it to allow the Palestinian Authority to play a role in managing the security and reconstruction of the Gaza Strip. All this has created a possible framework for initiating a significant reduction in the military buildup capabilities of Hamas and the other groups operating in the Strip, which is a process that in the long term will reduce the threat they pose to Israel.

Finally, despite the harsh, arrogant words voiced by Hamas officials after the campaign and the criticism within Israel regarding the fact that Hamas finished the war with its military capabilities and the potential to continue its military buildup still intact, the operation caused immense damage to terrorist elements, weaponry, and infrastructure in the Gaza Strip. Past experience teaches that the massive scale of the damage is likely to have an effect on

the desire of the groups in the Gaza Strip to renew hostilities, at least in the near future. In this way, Operation Protective Edge may well be a milestone on the road to the development of a long term strategy against the security threat emanating from the Gaza Strip. The conditions that resulted from the operation may be utilized as part of a process toward the demilitarization of the Gaza Strip, even if it is only partial and gradual, and as another phase in the evolution of a security reality that is more comfortable for Israel, especially if the Palestinian Authority enjoys some influence on security and administration in the Strip.

The importance of resisting the “victim doctrine,” however, must not be underestimated. This doctrine constitutes an operative tool in the full strategic sense of the term. Hamas’ mask of “victimhood” was cracked when its operatives carried out a series of executions of “collaborators” toward the end of the hostilities. Still, despite the appeal of international human rights groups to Hamas to ensure that individuals accused of crimes are not executed without a proper legal process, the implications of Hamas’ treatment as an organization with which it is possible to conduct normative, legal, and democratic discussion does not bode well for Israel.

Contending with threats such as the one posed by Hamas requires the IDF to formulate an updated concept of the use of force based on the mixture of weapons fire and maneuvers and on an understanding of the effectiveness and power of direct contact and the operational accomplishment that ground maneuvers can achieve. IDF force buildup must be guided by this understanding and must not erroneously rely on the use of standoff firepower, no matter how precise it may be. At the same time, the campaign cannot be military only. In order to contend with the threat developing in other arenas, Israel must devise an integrated doctrine that, alongside the military effort, incorporates political, public relations, and legal components. Only an integrated effort can provide Israel with the ability to contend on an ongoing basis with the threat posed by armed non-state groups, especially those that have adopted the victim doctrine as a central component of their struggle.

Notes

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- 1 “The Behavior of Hamas and the Nature of the Terrorist Threat from the Gaza Strip,” The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, Israeli Intelligence

Heritage and Commemoration Center, March 2010, www.terrorism-info.org.il/data/pdf/PDF_19064_1.pdf.

- 2 On the visit of Khaled Mashal, head of Hamas' Political Bureau, to the Gaza Strip, see: The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, Israeli Intelligence Heritage and Commemoration Center, December 23, 2009, <http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/he/article/18170>.
- 3 See the comments by the Iranian Foreign Minister during Khaled Mashal's visit to Iran in mid-December, 2009, *ibid*.
- 4 General Security Services, "Hamas's Buildup Efforts after Operation Pillar of Defense," Terrorism Portal, 2014, <http://www.shabak.gov.il/publications/study/Pages/NewItem090714.aspx>.
- 5 On this subject, see "The Military Use of Medical Installations and Ambulances by Hamas and the Other Terrorist Groups in the Gaza Strip," The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, Israeli Intelligence Heritage and Commemoration Center, August 23, 2009.
- 6 Photos from an unclassified IDF document showing rocket fire originating from civilian and international sites during Operation Protective Edge, August 2014; source on file with the author.
- 7 This view was espoused by many public figures and members of the Israeli media and supported by the Winograd Commission Report, which found that "after 34 days of fighting, there was no decision in the IDF's favor, even in 'points.' Hizbollah shelling of the Israeli home front was halted only by the ceasefire. Israel did not clearly win the war." See Winograd Commission Report, p. 396, article 19.
- 8 Barak Ravid, "Foreign Ministers of the European Union Call for the Disarmament of All Terrorist Groups in the Gaza Strip," *Haaretz*, July 22, 2014, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/1.2384744>.