

## Rethinking the Deterrence of Hamas

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Throughout Operation Protective Edge, Prime Minister Netanyahu stated that Israel's objectives included attacking Hamas and maintaining the organization's difficult economic and political situation; thwarting attempts by Hamas to rebuild its military capabilities damaged in the fighting; and restoring Israeli deterrence. The latter objective is the most problematic.

The purpose of a deterrent strategy is to prevent the enemy from attacking by convincing it that its action will lead to punishment more serious than the expected benefit. Deterrence in its widest form (*broad deterrence*) is intended to prevent a military conflict. In its more limited form (*narrow deterrence*), it is a tool for preventing the enemy from carrying out specific actions, even after a conflict has erupted, in order to reduce the chances of escalation and protect strategic assets. The inherent weakness of any deterrent strategy is that its achievements are measured in retrospect. It is very difficult to evaluate, let alone determine with certainty, when and under what conditions the enemy will assess that the benefit of an attack will exceed the damage it can be expected to cause. When the enemy fails to attack, it is difficult to assess in real time whether it fears a devastating response or it is weighing other considerations unconnected to deterrence.

In retrospect, the reason for the failure of Israeli deterrence to prevent a conflict with Hamas at the start of the recent campaign was an assessment that Hamas, which rules Gaza, would behave responsibly toward its citizens and prefer to preserve its political and military assets rather than risk an Israeli response that would lead to destruction and increased domestic pressure on the organization's leadership. In previous incidents over the past year, when the IDF attacked Hamas infrastructures, the organization chose to avoid a response that would lead to escalation with Israel. The assessment in

Jerusalem was that Hamas was demonstrating “political responsibility” and did not wish to risk a confrontation. In June 2014, Hamas chose differently and began to escalate the conflict with Israel, initially by loosening the reins on the other Palestinian factions, and later, by direct involvement in attacks on communities in the south.

What caused this change in the organization’s behavior? The conventional wisdom is that Hamas saw itself in distress politically and economically and that therefore it had almost nothing to lose from escalation with Israel. It was prepared to pay the price of an Israeli response so it could attempt to present an achievement that would stop it from growing weaker. Hamas, which shrugged off responsibility toward the citizens of Gaza, initiated the conflict with Israel and used its citizens as human shields.

This is an important lesson for deterrence in general and deterrence against a terrorist organization in particular: when the enemy feels that it does not have much to lose, this reduces the effectiveness of deterrence. If the government of Israel intends to preserve Hamas’ sorry situation, it must take into account that its ability to maintain deterrence against the organization over time will be damaged. In a reality where Hamas is weakened, its “state” elements are also weakened, and the forces that characterize a terrorist organization responsible solely for its own interests are strengthened. The challenge of deterrence against such an organization is very complicated because there are no means of leverage other than striking at the organization and its capabilities.

Hamas’ resolve during the conflict indicates that when the organization is in distress, Israel’s ability to ensure a long period of quiet will be even more limited than in the past. Therefore, if deterrence is restored to its state prior to the latest round of fighting, it will be part of a fluid situation in which any slight change could lead to the failure of Israeli deterrence.

The incorrect assessments by IDF officials at various stages of the campaign that Hamas would accept a ceasefire without an agreement providing it with some achievement suggest a lack of understanding of the dynamic that characterized Hamas and the change it underwent over the course of the fighting. Thus, there is a critical need to examine the underlying intelligence assumptions on which these assessments were based, in order to reduce the likelihood of similar errors in the future. This conclusion is not meant to imply that Israel should give up its deterrent goal, rather, that it should be cognizant of the limitations of this goal and formulate an improved

deterrence strategy on the basis of lessons from Operation Protective Edge. An additional lesson from the latest operation could help Israel improve its deterrence policy, even if in a limited way, and thus reduce the threat that deterrence will fail in the future against a Palestinian terrorist organization.

At the start of the Operation Protective Edge, Israeli deterrence not only failed, but simply collapsed, reflected in the failure of Israeli narrow deterrence to restrain Hamas at the start of the fighting. The Palestinian terrorist organization began to fire rockets and missiles at cities in the south and in Gush Dan early in the conflict. In previous conflicts, it gave careful consideration to such moves. In Operation Cast Lead, it avoided attacks aimed at central Israel, and in Operation Pillar of Defense, the number of attacks was more limited than in Protective Edge. In the latest campaign, Hamas also fired to the north of Gush Dan – a range it had not dared in the past – and carried out terrorist attacks on the ground, in the air, and from the sea. It appears that in fact, almost all of Hamas' barriers connected to Israeli deterrence fell and that it did not believe its behavior would lead to a devastating response that would threaten the stability of its regime. While Hamas indeed improved some of its capabilities in the last two years, in past operations its escalatory strategy was much more gradual and restraint.

The effectiveness of the Iron Dome active defense system, which prevented loss of life and damage to critical assets and reduced public pressure on decision makers for a devastating Israeli response, may have contributed to Hamas' preference for risking an Israeli response in an attempt to produce a strategic achievement in the fighting. Israel's attempt to avoid a ground attack and its failure to respond to rocket fire at Gush Dan in Operation Pillar of Defense, along with public opposition by some Israeli leaders to a ground campaign at the start of the current operation, were another incentive for Hamas to risk a confrontation with Israel.

Israel must learn from this failure and correct it. Israel proved in the latest round of fighting that it is prepared to endanger its soldiers in a ground attack. In the second half of the operation, Israel's leaders changed their messages slightly and began to make it clear that they would not rule out the possibility of a broad operation aimed at toppling the Hamas government. In order to strengthen narrow deterrence against Hamas, this message must continue to be reinforced, especially given the leak about the high price that can be expected for such an action. It is important to maintain the threat that Hamas will be toppled in response to well-defined offensive actions,

and not to use this threat against a wide range of operations, which would damage its credibility and blur Israel's red lines.

Israel has proven that it has the ability to obtain and take advantage of international legitimacy for activity in Gaza to launch pinpoint strikes against Hamas assets, even after the group has neutralized the effect of surprise and succeeded in entrenching itself. Israel must maximize this opportunity. It should create new rules of the game including a number of red lines that, if crossed, will lead to heavy punishment and damage to the organization's most important assets, and later, even a threat to its rule. Possible Israeli red lines could address the scope of the rocket fire, the range, the targets of attack, or terrorist activity not connected to rocket fire. This policy could fail in extreme cases, for example, if Hamas decided to conduct an all-out war against Israel. Nonetheless, to the extent possible, the group should be encouraged to avoid this. The failure of broad deterrence and a renewed outbreak of military conflict should not be allowed to lead immediately to a situation in which Hamas enjoys *carte blanche*.

The limitations of Israeli deterrence, as revealed in Operation Protective Edge, indicate that Prime Minister Netanyahu's objectives – to continue to weaken Hamas and restore deterrence against it – contradict each other. Israel's strategic choice on the southern front in this context is actually between two main scenarios: a weakened Hamas that is difficult to deter, and a stabilized Hamas with more effective levers of deterrence against it.

The ceasefire agreement does not indicate a clear Israeli choice between these alternatives. If Israel wishes to maintain stable deterrence against Hamas, it must allow the organization to rehabilitate itself. However, if it wishes to prevent Hamas from doing so, it must contend with a situation of unstable deterrence. Israel should undertake an assessment of the two options and promote the strategy that is correct for it. It must not leave the decision to other actors in the region, such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the Palestinian Authority, whose interests differ from Israel's.

In the overall balance, deterrence is of secondary importance compared to the goal of weakening Hamas. Maintaining the trend toward a weakened Hamas with economic and political tools, and even military tools if necessary, is an active goal intended to produce a better situation for Israel. In contrast, the goal of deterrence is more passive by nature and is intended mainly to buy time between the rounds of fighting. Israeli deterrence, no matter how successful, will only gain time for Israel until the next round. Israel must hold

an in-depth discussion about the implications of various alternatives to Hamas rule in Gaza and assess whether conditions are ripe for a genuine strategic change there. The return of Fatah, the development of a local leadership, the seizure of power by another terrorist group, and the strengthening of the connection with Egypt are examples of this. Only once the State of Israel has a clear strategy toward Gaza can it incorporate its deterrence policy into the framework of this strategy while reckoning with its limitations.