

The Military and Security Implications of Israel's Disengagement from the Gaza Strip

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Israel's disengagement from the Gaza Strip created the first homogenous contiguous area entirely under Palestinian control, with no Israeli presence whatsoever. Despite the importance and precedence of this step, there is general agreement that the limited Israeli withdrawal has not changed the basic conditions underlying the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and that the security threat facing Israel will continue to exist in the future. Still, there is no doubt that the withdrawal did bring about certain changes in the nature of the threat. The question of if and how security and military risks have resulted from the evacuation of settlers and Israeli military forces from the Gaza Strip provides an insight into the changes in this threat.

First, however, the concepts "threat" and "security risk" must be clarified. Not intended here is damage caused to Israel on the strategic level by the disengagement itself. For instance, public debate in Israel prior to the disengagement stressed both the problems involved with reinforcing the Palestinian impression that "Israel only understands force" and the fact that unilateral disengagement is likely to encourage Palestinians to continue regarding violence as an effective means for advancing their national interests. What is assessed here are the changes in the military capability of each party involved in the conflict and the balance of power between them as a direct result of the Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip.

Thus far the Palestinian Authority has not been able to gain hold over all the armed Palestinian organizations, and the underlying premise of this discussion is that this situation will not change significantly in the foreseeable future. Groups such as Hamas, Islamic Jihad, al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, and others will likely retain their operational capabilities and continue to constitute the major source of threat against Israel, as long as their capabilities are not diminished by Israel itself. This does not preclude the possibility of internal Palestinian "understandings," by which these groups accept various restrictions, based on the degree to which they advance their own interests. Nonetheless, the assumption here is that even if some progress is made on the political track, the basic motivation of continuing the violent confrontation with Israel will continue to exist, at least among these groups.

Types of Change in the Military and Security Threat

The structural asymmetry in the military balance of power between the parties prompts the Palestinians to guerilla warfare tactics, which on a tactical level assume the form of individual strikes against Israel. This includes actions such as dispatching suicide bombers to Israeli population centers, bombarding Israeli settlements with mortar shells, and firing rockets at Jewish localities close to the Green Line. For its part, Israel attempts both to defend itself against attack and to initiate offensive operations within Palestinian territory, including preventive operations and reprisals aimed at deterring the continuation of violent Palestinian activities.

In this state of affairs, assessing the balance of power with regard to military strength and the security threat encompasses the following components:

- Change in the Palestinians' capability of initiating offensive operations and harming Israeli soldiers and civilians. This results from a change in offensive Palestinian capabilities, as well as Israel's defensive capabilities.
- Possible change in limitations on Israel's use of offensive force
- Impact on the Palestinians' ability to build a military force in preparation for "the next round"
- Changes in basic tactical capabilities, which dictate changes on operative levels and influence the use of military force as part of the overall strategy of all parties to the conflict.

Basic Elements of the Pre-Disengagement Security Threat

At the beginning of the conflict, the Gaza Strip was a major point of origin for cells dispatched for operations within the Green Line, as well as operations carried out against settlements and the military forces protecting them. Construction of the defense apparatus along the security fence limited the main Palestinian offensive effort in the region to within the Gaza Strip, and moved the center of gravity of activity against Israel to Judea and Samaria. At the same time, the Palestinians in Gaza developed the capability of firing artillery rockets at Israeli localities within the Green Line.

The supply of weapons to Palestinian forces relied primarily on arms smuggled across the Egyptian border, and to a much lesser degree via the

Mediterranean Sea. Tunnels dug between the Palestinian and Egyptian portions of Rafiah constituted and continue to constitute the main entryway of arms into the Gaza Strip. The Palestinians also developed the capability of independent production of simple weapons, including Qassam rockets, mortars, mortar shells, and various types of explosive devices. Despite its investment of significant efforts, the IDF has failed to block completely the smuggling channel across the Egyptian border.

The Israeli deployment on the ground was determined first and foremost by the map of Israeli settlements both inside the Gaza Strip and outside, within the Green Line. Israeli settlements in the Gaza Strip comprised a number of enclaves of settlements surrounded by hostile Palestinian areas and relied on a small number of roads connecting them to the Israeli road system within the Green Line. The need to defend the Egyptian border along the Philadelphi route, adjacent to a populated Palestinian area that offered no tactical depth, was also a major Israeli weak point.

Israel's deployment posed a serious challenge for itself and provided the Palestinians with a set of opportunities to strike at IDF forces and Israeli settlements in ways suiting the tactical capabilities of the Palestinians themselves. These included: striking at traffic on the roads, primarily by means of explosive devices and ambushes; striking at military camps and permanent, primarily isolated IDF posts; striking at settlements through mortar shelling or infiltrating assault cells; and firing rockets at Israeli settlements adjacent to the Green Line, such as Sderot and the agricultural settlements in the area. Most of the Israeli casualties were incurred on the roads, in the settlements, and in the military posts located within the Gaza Strip itself. Considering the formidable conditions they faced, the achievements of the IDF and the General Security Services in preventing casualties were most impressive. Nonetheless, the Palestinians were occasionally still able to launch attacks that claimed multiple Israeli casualties. These attacks prompted severe Israeli reprisals, which at times led to escalation and additional military and political entanglement.

The artillery rockets that the Palestinians fired and continue to fire at Israeli settlements became a major threat, in part because of the Palestinians' increasing difficulties employing other methods of operation. Not only are the rockets limited to a relatively short distance, but they also inflict relatively little damage and are extremely inaccurate. For this reason, the rockets threaten primarily only large, densely populated localities, such as urban localities short distances from the Green Line. Only one such target exists in the Gaza Strip area: the town of Sderot. While

rocket fire, as expected, has resulted in only a small number of casualties, the psychological impact of such a continuous threat to the routine of everyday life has been significant. However, notwithstanding its central importance, the rocket-based threat is still considered less serious than the more classical terrorist threats posed by various types of suicide bombings and shooting attacks.

The IDF has devoted much effort to preventing the smuggling of rockets into Gaza, and has also bombed targets related to rocket production. However, aerial offensive efforts, no matter how successful and effective they may be, cannot disarm the enemy completely. Although the Palestinians' ability to launch rockets at Israeli targets has also been limited by the relatively low reserve stock of rockets at their disposal, they have still been able to present a continuous threat by firing one or two rockets at Sderot each day. Furthermore, because of the relative ease of firing rockets, the Palestinians began using them as a form of response or reprisal for offensive Israeli operations in Judea and Samaria. Yet the Palestinians' overall limited ability to launch rockets, in conjunction with the little damage such rockets can inflict, has meant that in the vast majority of cases, Israel was able to continue operating without the rocket-based threat presenting a significant obstacle.

The Change in Threat Caused by the Disengagement

Naturally, the threat to Israel from the Gaza Strip changes over time, and it would be a mistake to attribute all recent developments to the disengagement alone. Some stemmed from the learning and adaptation processes that are constantly underway within the Palestinian organizations. Other developments – especially the Palestinians' capability to recover, amass weapons, and regroup for continued confrontation – are results of breaks in IDF offensive activity, which also cannot be attributed unequivocally to the disengagement.

At the same time, a number of significant changes have indeed stemmed directly from the disengagement:

- Rationalization of Israel's system of defense – the many weak points in Israel's defense system that the Palestinians were able to exploit to exact substantial Israeli casualties were eliminated by Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip. Assuming no meaningful change in Palestinian ability to infiltrate through the barrier fence, the number of Israeli casualties can be expected to decrease in and around the Gaza region, even in the case of an increase in the

conflict's overall violence. The expected drop in multiple-casualty attacks will also likely lower Israel's motivation to carry out broad ground operations as retribution. The IDF will then be able to significantly reduce the number of troops permanently stationed across the border from the Gaza Strip.

- Western countries appear to regard Israel's military withdrawal, and especially its evacuation of settlements, as substantially diminishing the legitimacy of continued Palestinian attacks against Israel from within the Gaza Strip. As a result, harsh Israeli military responses to Palestinian attacks originating from the Gaza Strip are deemed legitimate and understandable, as long as they do not exceed reasonable proportion. The experience of the first few weeks following the disengagement supports this claim. Still, the Palestinians will undoubtedly attempt to create linkage between operations in the Gaza Strip region and operations in Judea and Samaria, and to convince the international community that the continued Israeli presence in Judea and Samaria justifies the continuation of attacks on all fronts.
- The removal of Israeli targets from the Gaza Strip decreases the Palestinians' ability to control escalation of the conflict. Prior to the disengagement, Palestinian attacks on Israeli settlements and the military were considered as indicating a low level of escalation, and Palestinian threats of attacks within the Green Line were seen as indicating a higher level of escalation. The Israelis, however, retain a wide variety of possibilities for using force on different levels of escalation.
- Israel's relinquishment of control over the Gaza Strip border with Egypt may very well make the smuggling of weapons into Gaza and of Palestinian operatives into Sinai significantly easier than it was before the disengagement. The experience of the first few post-disengagement weeks is not encouraging, and Israel may need to accept this revised situation as a working assumption. However, this may not necessarily be the case in the long term, especially with regard to more substantial types of weapons. Egypt, it should be remembered, has ways of dealing with this problem that Israel did not possess when it was responsible for sealing the border. In any event, it would be incorrect to assume that there has been an unlimited influx of weapons into the Gaza Strip from the moment Egypt assumed responsibility for the border.

Not all weapons smuggling results in a significant change in the threat level. For example, the smuggling of small arms and light weapons, such as rifles and even anti-tank grenade launchers, has no meaningful impact on the balance of power. However, weapons smuggling into Gaza may expand to include types of weapons not previously possessed by the Palestinians, like anti-helicopter and anti-aircraft weapons. Another possible outcome could be a significant increase in the quantity of different types of weapons already possessed by the Palestinians today. Most likely, though, is that heavy weaponry such as cannons, heavy mortars, and other such weapons will not be infiltrated into Gaza, due both to the difficulty of smuggling such weapons and their high visibility, which makes them easy targets for the Israeli air force. Heavy weaponry will most likely suffer a fate similar to that of the armored vehicles possessed by the Palestinian police force at the beginning of the second intifada. At the same time, Israel will have to turn more of its attention to the blocking of the Egyptian-Israeli border as it will probably become a significant route for Palestinian operatives attempting to infiltrate into Israel.

The threat presented by artillery rockets will likely increase. In light of the absence of Israeli targets within the Gaza Strip and the distancing of most Israeli settlements to outside the range of light mortars, rockets have become the primary means available for strikes against Israel targets. Palestinian groups, it can be assumed, will take advantage of the period of calm for replenishing weapons and stockpiling reserves, as well as developing or purchasing rockets with a range of 10-15 kilometers. Increased weapons reserves will enable Palestinians to fire larger rocket barrages and to maintain the threat for a longer period of time, and increased range will bring more settlements into the area under threat. Therefore, it should be assumed that Palestinians will attempt to devise different escalation levels based on the parameters of range and quantity. At the same time, here too the change in threat will be only partially attributable to the disengagement, as it can be assumed that the range and quantity of the rockets held by the Palestinians would have increased to some degree in any event, regardless of the Israeli withdrawal.

Some argue that the Palestinians will attempt to emulate Hizbollah and use their artillery rockets to reach a balance of deterrence with Israel similar to the one that exists along Israel's northern border with Lebanon. In Palestinian eyes, such a balance of deterrence would create a link between their activity in the Gaza Strip and their activity in Judea and Samaria. Yet in fact, the difference in conditions between

southern Lebanon and the Gaza Strip will likely prevent the emergence of such a balance of deterrence. First, the calm serves Israeli interests, not the interests of Hamas and other armed organizations. At the same time, the asymmetry between sides is such that the rocket-based threat does not provide the Palestinian organizations with a strong enough defensive umbrella for their operations if they desire to continue their attacks against Israel. When the threat of attack is substantial, Israel has a strong interest in carrying out preventive operations that, in the eyes of Israel's leadership, justifies a degree of infringement upon daily life in some areas. In other words, if the Palestinian groups are interested in calm, the rocket-based threat will not be the instrument that allows them to achieve it.

Second, the Palestinian rocket-based threat will remain limited. It is improbable that the Palestinians will be able to acquire large quantities of long-range (more than 15 km) rockets. Massive Palestinian use of rockets, especially types of rockets that they are unable to produce on their own, will put the Egyptians in an uncomfortable position, as Egypt, the power that enabled the rockets to be smuggled into the Gaza Strip, will be held partially responsible. Third, as a result of the Gaza Strip's small size, Israel's capability of operational measures to limit the launching of rockets – even if it is unable to prevent all launchings entirely – is very real, and much more effective than its ability to do so in southern Lebanon.

Palestinian success in the introduction of rockets into Judea and Samaria and firing them against Israeli towns and settlements (in the Sharon region, for example) would be much more significant than any reasonably foreseeable development in Palestinian capability in this realm in the Gaza Strip. In this case too, the emergence of such Palestinian operational capability will also not necessarily be a direct result of Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip. Once again, it is probable that any prolonged lull in Israeli preventive operations in the West Bank would have provided the Palestinians with the opportunity of gaining this capability.

Conclusion

The primary strategic significance of the disengagement is not a function of the change in the security-military threat stemming from the disengagement itself. Rather, it lies in the diplomatic arena and the realm of internal Israeli politics, as well as in its reinforcement of the Palestinians' conceptions regarding the effectiveness of armed struggle as a means of advancing their strategic aims in general, and of compelling

Israel to concede territory in particular. Similarly, it would be a mistake to attribute all developments in Palestinian operational capability to the disengagement. It is likely that most of the important developments would be the result of the lull in Israeli preventive operations rather than the withdrawal of Israeli forces and the evacuation of settlements from the Gaza Strip.

The change in the military-security threat facing Israel stemming directly from the disengagement will find expression in the following areas:

- Reduction in the exposure of Israeli citizens and military forces to attacks by Palestinian organizations
- Reduction in the operational flexibility of Palestinian groups, as well as an expansion in Israel's ability to respond fiercely to violent Palestinian operations (at least in the short term)
- A significant possibility that the quantity of weapons entering the Gaza Strip will increase, including the appearance of types of weaponry that have previously not been seen there, such as anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons
- Increase in the threat posed to Israeli settlements by Palestinian artillery rockets

As military-security considerations constitute an important component of Israel's internal debate on the future of the territories, developments and changes in the security threat emanating from the post-disengagement Gaza Strip can be expected to serve as a model for assessing the implications of additional withdrawals that are possible in the future.