

The Operational Aspects to Fighting the Qassam

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Introduction

The primary manifestation of Palestinian terror from the Gaza Strip is Qassam rocket high-trajectory fire, supplemented by attempted fire with Grad-model Katyusha rockets. Although the rocket fire has not yet caused much loss of life, its impact, both in terms of emotional wear and tear on the local residents and in terms of public opinion, is considerable. Once the fighting in Lebanon ended, the focus of military activity returned to terrorist activities from Gaza and, in particular, efforts to curb rocket fire as much as possible. Interestingly, the Gaza arena, with its continued firing of Qassam rockets, is perceived as a more acute locus of terror than Judea and Samaria: even though terror emerging from Judea and Samaria in 2006 has claimed a not insignificant number of casualties, the Israeli public senses that this area is under control. In contrast, the firing of Qassam rockets from the Gaza Strip generates a sense of helplessness and lack of control. Analysis of this phenomenon is not the subject of this paper, but it provides the reader with a relevant context.

Much has been written about ways to stop the Qassam rocket fire. In an effort to provide a quick solution, various parties (including in the defense establishment) have occasionally offered ideas such as incursions into the Gaza Strip for an extensive ground operation, ranging from reoccupation of parts of the Strip to prolonged stays in Gaza of various durations. The questions regarding the objectives of such a campaign and how it could impact on Qassam rocket fire over time are far from answered and remain open. At the same time, the calls to focus on combating the Qassam with standoff fire continue, and this summer's fighting in the north provided a relevant platform for both supporters and opponents. Former air force commander Maj. Gen. (res.) Eitan Ben Eliyahu, in a paper¹ written after the assassination of Jamal Abu Samhadna (some argue his death was unintentional), suggests focusing on long range precision standoff fire. He argues that targeted strikes from the air, over time and in a systematic manner, will eventually destroy no less (!) than the will of terrorist elements to fight, or will cause it to subside to

¹ E. Ben Eliyahu, "The Assassinations Will Win the War," www.ynet.co.il, June 9, 2006.

a level that will lose its political significance. Clear and penetrating words, indeed. However, in his paper Ben Eliyahu does not refer to the depth of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the extent of the enemy's will (and ability) to harm Israel, and the need to harness substantial Israeli resources for targeted killings of a large number of targets. Ze'ev Schiff,² who wrote about the cumulative failure of Israeli deterrence against Qassam rocket launches, correctly foresaw the situation. His prediction with regard to the rocket fire is not optimistic: "Sooner or later the Palestinians will improve the range, or will succeed in smuggling long range Katyusha rockets from the Sinai Peninsula. Then we will see Ashdod within firing range." If that is true, what can the IDF do in the face of such a gloomy forecast?

This paper will try to examine different aspects of the military-operational fight against the Qassam threat. First, it presents some basic assumptions that place the operational challenge in the context of realistic aims and clear constraints. Guidelines derived from the basic assumptions are followed by an initial analysis of the operational problem and the methods best suited to dealing with this challenge.

Basic Assumptions

- *Palestinian terror will continue on varying levels and over time.* Palestinian terror is not expected to disappear. The confrontation with the Palestinians is a national-religious conflict whose end is not in sight. Terror, including Qassam fire, will continue at different levels of intensity.
- *The fight against Qassam fire is designed to limit the rocket fire.* One cannot completely eradicate the Qassam threat: there will always be some element that manages to fire the rockets.
- *One should expect an enhancement of terror methods, including in Qassam rockets.* The Qassam represents a range of high-trajectory firing abilities (such as the Grad missile). Terror elements invest ongoing efforts in enhancing the effectiveness of the rocket fire, its range, accuracy, and the amount of damage it can inflict.
- *Israel's war on terror from the Gaza Strip is subject to international political constraints.* Following the withdrawal of IDF forces from the Gaza Strip, the IDF's

² Z. Schiff, "The Qassam Strip," *Haaretz*, December 31, 2005.

operational conditions have changed and must be considered in any operational solution.

- *Anarchy in Gaza is not in Israel's interests.* Every effort should be made to resist dragging the Gaza Strip into a state of anarchy, mainly because in such a situation the organization's splinter groups and their extremism will increase, as will their motivation to use all kinds of terror against Israel.

The Operational Challenge

The operational challenges of fighting Qassam fire are only part of the war on terror, but given the special situation of the Gaza Strip they can be isolated from other components. A key element to the challenges posed by the Qassam is that high-trajectory fire is targeted easily at Israel without the need for much complicated preparation. Thus the operational challenge can be divided into two basic components: challenges connected to the processes of production and firing of the Qassam rocket; and challenges connected to the processes that drive and activate the wider picture of terror.

The main challenge to combating the Qassam is the intelligence challenge – the need for accurate operational intelligence is a condition of any effective operation. The raw materials supply processes, manufacturing processes, transportation, launch, and escape of the launch unit are all links in the chain of the threat. To identify the different physical locations that are part of this chain requires the collection of high quality accurate intelligence information. In addition, generating quality intelligence regarding the people involved in the process and the facilities, vehicles, and other infrastructures will allow more effective operational activity. The other operational challenge relates to the ability to strike accurately at any stage without harming innocent civilians. Inflicting damage on the elements that comprise the Qassam threat can be carried out by various methods that generally belong to two operational classes: standoff fire – accurate fire from a distance, and direct contact strikes.³

The operational challenges connected to the wider terrorism picture concern the need to provide targets that will harm the terrorist elements in general, and in particular

³ For analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of these approaches, see: G. Siboni, "The Military Battle against Terrorism: Direct Contact vs. Standoff Fighting," *Strategic Assessment* 9, no 1 (2006):

their motivation to resort to terror. One example of this operational challenge is the ability to identify quality targets that will allow a retaliation of sorts for Qassam fire, even if these targets are not directly related to the specific firing chain. The goal is to create an effective deterrent to the Qassam rocket launchers and their operators. In order to generate ongoing response ability, there is a need for both intelligence and strike ability that can be activated within a short time frame against suitable targets. True, there will always be a terror element that fires Qassam rockets that will not be deterred. The assumption is, however, that the greater the overall effectiveness of the operational solution, the more the deterrent will increase.

The question of civilian defenses arises here as well, i.e., protection of houses and civilian facilities against direct Qassam damage. The following equation is relevant to any operational approach: the most effective operational solution⁴ is the one that strikes against the sources of the threat. The further away the operational solution is from the sources, the more the overall effectiveness decreases. Protecting civilian infrastructures brings the operational solution to its lower limit whereby the cost effectiveness is the smallest. If the funding for civilian protection resources comprises civil resources, it is better to allocate them to improving the quality of residential life rather than building protective measures that offer little in the way of benefit.

The Operational Perception

The operational military solution to Qassam rocket fire requires a comprehensive approach. Experience in combating terror proves the inaccuracy in thinking that it is possible to create an effective solution by a one-dimensional operational solution. One can find recent examples of seeking such a solution in redirecting the multi-faceted operational solution to specific strikes, standoff fire, and artillery fire. The comprehensive operational solution, however, demands that a range of operational capabilities be examined against the operational challenges, in order to arrive at a balanced and effective combination of fighting means. The ideal solution should utilize the full range of IDF and security forces operational abilities. The components of this approach to warfare include:

⁴ An effective operational solution is defined as a solution that offers high cost effectiveness, in other words; a good operational result is achieved with a low investment in resources.

- *Creating quality intelligence.* The existence of a sustained quality intelligence effort involves the use of a wide range of tools, including SIGINT technological abilities, forecasting abilities, and various sensing means. These tools offer an advantage by virtue of the ability to use them from a distance, and they are critical to the intelligence effort, even if it is difficult to create a complete quality picture on their basis alone. The intelligence effort also requires direct access to human intelligence sources and interrogation of involved parties. These two elements were substantially impaired with the withdrawal from the Gaza Strip. Thus, the intelligence authorities must create means that will enhance their ability to obtain such intelligence. Restoring the ability to arrest individuals involved in terrorist activity or wanted for interrogation should not be underestimated. Creating the ability to carry out arrests, both in terms of the quality and quantity required, justifies rapid force assembly processes for appropriate units. The ability to carry out a large number of arrests in urban areas of the Gaza Strip also has substantial impact on the overall deterrence balance.⁵
- *A balance of standoff attack and direct contact.* The last few years of fighting have given rise to a fighting concept in the Gaza Strip based on two assumptions: the first is based on deploying armored and protected forces to enter the field and carry out strikes against terror elements while providing maximum protection for IDF forces; the second is based on standoff fire against terrorist parties through the use of precision strikes, generally from the air. The ability to carry out armored operations was limited by the withdrawal from Gaza, and the solution that remained was based mainly on carrying out specific strikes and using standoff fire. Over time, the nearly exclusive dependence on this means resulted in its erosion. The need to build an effective ability to strike against terror elements in the Gaza Strip requires improving the ability to act directly in this arena. One example of such activity is the operation where an IDF ground force succeeded in carrying out a strike against a Qassam rocket launch unit before the launch. The IDF must have a substantive ability to act through direct contact in the field. The operational units must be able to achieve penetration in the field, carry out

⁵ See note 3.

intelligence-based ground strikes, carry out ambushes in expected areas of activity, and conduct arrests for investigation and preemptive purposes. Assembling such a capability to the required extent (several operations per night) is essential, but is not simple and requires time. While employing forces deep inside the Gaza Strip involves numerous risks, some can be overcome by developing a suitable operational approach, through training, technological support, and a strong support system. Standoff activity will not become redundant but will be reserved only for cases in which direct contact operations cannot be carried out to prevent an immediate attack (the ticking bomb scenario).

- *Limited incursions.* The IDF has to maintain the freedom to operate in different fields in the Gaza Strip through limited incursions. The essence of incursions is the ability to penetrate hostile territory, carry out disruptive, punitive, and retaliatory activity, and return home. This operational tool is very important, and the ability to execute it within short time spans should be maintained. These incursions can vary in nature – secret low-profile incursions or massive armored operations. The incursions should have a defined short time frame (hours, days) and the temptation to leave forces in the field over time should be avoided.
- *Selecting targets and objectives.* The IDF must have the ability to carry out ongoing strikes on the force buildup processes of the involved organizations. Inflicting ongoing damage on these processes (training, equipment, smuggling weapons, and procurement) even if they are not directly connected to the source of fire will support the overall combat effort. The IDF must create continuous quality intelligence that will enable it to build the most effective balance of deterrence. In this way it will also determine the retaliation for a specific rocket attack, part of the overall response to any Qassam fire. Deferring use of this response will erode its potential. The defense system must generate an operational format that does not require the ongoing ritual of lengthy situation evaluations at the end of which the response loses some of effectiveness, and its use occasionally becomes irrelevant.
- *Systems for intercepting airborne missiles.* The assumption is that the Qassam rocket will not be completely eradicated, and it will continue to be used on various levels of intensity. Nevertheless, all technological and operational abilities should

be harnessed in order to limit the phenomenon as much as possible. The maturation of various technologies allows development of systems that intercept and strike missiles of different kinds. Due to the fact that this threat exists not only in Gaza but also in Lebanon, one can assume that the threat of high-trajectory fire will spread to Judea and Samaria. Thus, the defense authorities must aim to find technological means designed to strike rockets or divert them from their trajectory or, alternately, to achieve an immediate strike on the source of the fire (seconds after the launch). A sustained and continuous technological effort is required in order to utilize fully these abilities within total warfare activities.

- *Use of artillery fire.* The predicament that forced the IDF to provide an immediate deterrent solution to the Qassam fire prompted the use of artillery fire for deterrence purposes and, in certain cases, the attempt to target a specific site after the rockets were launched. Use of this fire is a component of total warfare, and the abilities it offers should be maximized. Without another solution, this type of fire is highly effective, and experience shows that it is capable of reducing and disrupting rocket launches.
- *Defensive effort.* The existing protection standards in Israel provide the best possible solution for civilian protection requirements. Thus, Israel should concentrate on implementation of these standards and not make significant financial investments in additional protection means whose effectiveness is unclear.
- *Concept of command and control.* A balanced offense against the Qassam requires the support of an organized command and control approach, to allow integrated military activity between the various IDF corps and the involvement of other parties, such as the General Security Service (GSS) and the Israeli police. This is a specific requirement for the fight against terror from the Gaza Strip, including the Qassam, but also represents general sustained efforts at operational effectiveness. An optimal command and control structure is needed in order to support processes of cooperation at all levels of warfare, especially at the operational levels where unity of objective and the required operational focus foster a basis for impressive cooperation. At the same time, a basis for inter-corps and inter-organizational

cooperation should be created by sharing resources and information, and utilizing the relative advantages of each party.

Conclusion

The range of operational elements requires an ongoing total combative effort over time, incorporating the full range of components available to the IDF. Any single approach should not be expected to be capable of eradicating the threat in one fell swoop. Israel cannot allow itself to accept Qassam fire at the level it has witnessed in recent months or be maneuvered into operational paralysis. Anyone who neglects ongoing operational activity will ultimately be forced to carry out a massive ground operation in Gaza, even if this does not serve the overall security interests of Israel.

This paper has not touched upon other important components of warfare relating to the use of diplomatic, economic, political, and other means. The importance of these components is clear, and should be addressed by other frameworks.