

Operation Cast Lead: Civil-Military Processes and Results of the Campaign

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While Operation Cast Lead is over, not all the facts have come to light and the perspective of time is still lacking. Nonetheless it is already possible to relate to two central themes: the processes that took place, in particular with regard to civil-military relations, and the outcome of the operation, i.e., the extent to which the operation's objectives were achieved.

The Processes

The three most important words in any operational command, in descending order of importance, are: *goal*: what do we actually want to accomplish? *mission*: what do we have to do in order to attain the goal? and *method*: how do we accomplish the mission? The importance of these three questions holds true for all echelons involved.

When the issue at hand is an operational command at the level of the General Staff there is also an additional aspect. While the second and third questions above relate primarily to the military realm, the first, by contrast, is entirely the responsibility of the political echelon. The political echelon must define – or approve – the goals of the operation, i.e., the objectives of the war.

When the goals of an operation are unclear, change from one day to the next, or are simply unattainable, the effectiveness of the military operation is significantly undermined. The Second Lebanon War was a good example of the ineffectiveness of a military operation caused in great part due to the lack of clarity in stated goals. In this sense, Operation Cast Lead may be viewed as a substantive improvement.

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The awareness of the need to discuss the operation's objectives was apparent from the beginning. At some point (late though not too late), the various decision makers involved convened in order to define clear, simple, and attainable objectives.

The process, however, was long and convoluted, and therefore impacted negatively on the effectiveness of the operation, while also extending it unnecessarily beyond what was required. It started with defining a very broad goal of "creating a better security reality," in other words, "wanting things to be better." This statement cannot serve as a goal, and indeed, the real discussion began only three days after the start of the operation and debated three approaches. The minimalist approach eyed the achievement of a long term ceasefire, based on deterrence, as a sufficient goal. The intermediate position defined the goal as destroying most of Hamas' military capability. The maximalists defined the objective as the collapse of Hamas' government (creating a new political reality, not just a new security reality). The decision that the main objective of the operation was to be the minimalist approach was made two weeks after the beginning of the operation and caused

its unnecessary extension by at least a full week. Should one claim that using ground forces was crucial for achieving even the minimalist goal, such a measure already played itself out in two or three days.

A discussion of almost equal importance, one that also dragged on unnecessarily, dealt with the mission. The second objective of the operation – though it was not articulated at the start of the operation, it did become agreed on and defined a few days later – had to do with the arms smuggling from Egypt into Gaza. It was agreed that the operation's second objective would be to prevent further smuggling.

This argument centered not on the goal but on the mission. There were two approaches: one held that there is no response to the arms smuggling other than Israeli control of the Philadelphi route. Based on this approach, the IDF must control the route (and, if necessary, the city of Rafah as well) and remain there

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over time. Those supporting this approach saw the operation as an opportunity to correct the mistake made three years ago when Israel decided to evacuate Philadelphi. The other approach argued that the objective – preventing arms smuggling into Gaza – would be achieved through diplomacy. The debate over this issue lasted for some two weeks before the second approach was approved.

In both cases, it was possible and necessary to have made the decisions before rather than during the operation. This is not to say that one must never change objectives or missions in the midst of an operation depending on its development, but that is not what happened in this case. The results of the military action, both the aerial campaign and the ground operation, were expected ahead of time, and these should have had no effect on either of the two debated issues.

Moreover, unlike wars of the past in which the results on the battlefield – sometimes exclusively – determined the political outcome, today the situation is different. The political solution (the exit from the operation) hardly has any relationship to the rate of tactical success. It would therefore be proper for the political debate on “how do we conclude this operation” to start not four days after the beginning of the operation, rather four months before it. It would thus be possible to clarify to ourselves what we want and, more importantly, it would be possible to coordinate conclusion of the operation ahead of time with the United States, and thereby avoid unnecessary embarrassment regarding Security Council deliberations.

The Outcome

In the end, three goals were defined for the operation: create a long term period of calm, prevent Hamas from rearming itself, and bring Gilad Shalit home (this objective was articulated only towards the end of the operation, and even then not in unequivocal terms).

It is probably safe to stay that the first – long term calm – has been achieved, in particular because Israel’s deterrence was reestablished, though not only for this reason. Hamas is, first and foremost, a political movement with political ambitions, and its immediate ambition is to stabilize its control of Gaza and then, later on, attain similar power in the West Bank. At present the challenges facing Hamas are significant. At stake is not only the reconstruction of Gaza and Hamas’ ability to

supply food and medicines for the area's 1.5 million residents, but also its ability to receive support from other players, at least in the Arab world. It is reasonable to assume that Hamas' top priority dictates strengthening its own political standing and governing capacities before turning to another military encounter. The population in Gaza gives the organization credit, but that credit is not unlimited. It is clear that another violent round bringing about another wave of destruction may make the population rise up against Hamas, just as Nasrallah is afraid of such an atmosphere prevailing in Lebanon. Thus in contrast to Israel's demands, the international community should rescind its boycott of Hamas and agree to extend all economic-humanitarian aid in a joint effort with Hamas, instead of going through different organizations. As such, the aid can be made conditional on the existence of absolute calm.

The second goal, ensuring a situation in which arms smuggling from Egypt into Gaza is a phenomenon of the past, has not yet been achieved because there is very little connection between Israel's military successes in Gaza and this objective, which is completely dependent on Egypt. Egypt has no real interest in stopping the smuggling. Continuing the dynamic in which Hamas attacks Israelis and Israel attacks Hamas operatives is tolerable from Egypt's perspective, as long as it happens on a small scale. Furthermore, the smuggling industry provides a livelihood for many, from the heads of the Bedouin tribes to the Egyptian officers in the area. Egypt has no desire to confront them.

How, on the basis of the Operation Cast Lead, might it be possible to convince Egypt to change its approach? Israel does have an effective tool at its disposal, namely the Israel-Gaza crossings. Israel and Hamas have a common interest that conflicts with Egypt's interest, namely, that Gaza's economic ties with the outside world run through Egypt rather than Israel. Israel can present a tough stance on the subject of its crossings with Gaza, eventually agreeing to something that runs counter to its own interests by opening the crossings but insisting that the crossings be opened to people and the goods needed in Gaza only if and when the Gaza-Egypt border is properly sealed.

Should Egypt agree to change its approach, then it must stop the illegal traffic of people and goods in the only area where it is possible to do so effectively. This is not the Philadelphi route, which is a narrow

corridor where on both sides – Palestinian and Egyptian – there are houses that are home to members of the same families living on either side. As long as this is the geography and the demography, smuggling cannot be stopped at this location. No German technology, American guidance, or European forces can change that.

Egypt, for its part, can create a security zone of some 5 km south of Philadelphi. It is possible to erect two fences, 2 km apart from one another in this area, which is empty of buildings and people, and ensure that no one enters the area in between. One road would bisect this area and be outfitted with gates, backed up by scanners and advanced technology. It is possible to stop the smuggling in this location if one really wants to. In other words, the political border between Gaza and Egypt would remain Philadelphi, and, without any connection to it, Egypt would act unilaterally within its own sovereign space to stop the smuggling.

One of the worrisome developments on this issue is the rushed agreement signed between Israel and the United States two days before the ceasefire. Based on this agreement, the United States will intercept arms, most of which come from Iran, even before it arrives in Sinai. Since the operational ramifications are tenuous at best, this is a problematic political agreement that implies a solution to the smuggling issue in a different way – and that therefore it is possible to be more conciliatory with Egypt.

The third objective – bringing Gilad Shalit home – was not articulated at any stage as one of the goals of the operation. This is something that political sources are careful to stress. Nonetheless, because of the pressure of public opinion, it became a part of Israel's demands. As of the time of this writing, there has not been any real progress with regard to this issue. Still, it is important to stress that Israel will be able to bring Gilad Shalit home “at a reasonable cost” of releasing Hamas prisoners only if it links this to the subject of the crossings. Both issues concern a humanitarian problem. One is more painful to Hamas, and the other is more painful to Israel. If Israel is not

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careful to link them together, it will lose important leverage. Israel is mistaken when it is prepared to open the crossings more extensively without making this conditional on the Red Cross being free to visit the captive Israeli soldier.

Conclusion

Operation Cast Lead was a success by any standard, and certainly when compared with the Second Lebanon War. While it is true that the enemy was weaker and the circumstances less complex, there is still room for satisfaction with the noticeable improvement in the performance of the IDF, the Home Front Command, and the other authorities. On the positive side, at least some of the lessons that emerged from the Winograd Commission report with regard to the decision making process were implemented. Nonetheless, the political apparatus started late and did not operate in tandem with the military action. It was led by various elements (with the Ministry of Defense in charge of interfacing with Egypt, and the prime minister and the minister for foreign affairs dealing with others), each operating on its own. Alongside the successes, the operation also encountered unnecessary glitches (insulting the French foreign minister, the superfluous spat with the Turks, the Security Council debate, and the embarrassing incident between Olmert and Condoleezza Rice).

It is important to remember that the political aspect is fundamentally more complex than the military one. On the military side, there were (at least in this case) two players, Israel and Hamas, conducting a simple zero-sum struggle between them. On the political side, there were many more players with multiple varied interests. Therefore, in order to reach the optimal outcome, early preparation and coordination (with whomever possible), simulations of various scenarios, and daily choices between alternatives are critical. It is hard to conclude that all of these were accomplished in optimal fashion.