

# Trapped Between Maneuver and Firepower: Hamas and Hizbollah

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Hizbollah and Hamas are guerilla and terrorist organizations that in less than 20 years have developed into quasi-governmental entities. They have done so in a relatively smaller area than is usually the case in guerilla warfare, and in the case of the Gaza Strip, primarily in urban areas suited to this type of fighting. Militarily, Hizbollah is a big brother of Hamas: Hizbollah is more experienced, knowledgeable, and self-assured. Nonetheless, Hizbollah is learning from Hamas' conduct during Operation Cast Lead and is responding according to its own interests.

The primary military threat that Hamas and Hizbollah pose for Israel is the ongoing launching of rockets and heavy mortar bombs, with varying ranges and impact, directly at the nation's citizens. The military forces of Hamas and Hizbollah add a secondary, parallel threat to the classical arsenal of guerilla and terrorist activities along Israel's borders and within its territory: explosives of various kinds, sniper fire, ambush shootings, car bombs, attempts to kidnap soldiers and civilians, and use of suicide bombers wearing explosive belts.

For many years Iran and Syria have provided Hamas and Hizbollah with military knowledge, offensive and defensive doctrines, and expertise with explosives and the manufacturing of improvised explosive devices. The organizations have received operational advice, instruction in methods of manufacturing arms, training in methods of warfare and use of armaments, training of personnel designated for specific jobs such as anti-tank missile operators and explosives experts, training of rocket

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operators in range finding, sighting, and preparing launch locations and means of various kinds, and more. Hamas' and Hizbollah's force buildup have occurred in an organized process and as dictated by operational needs, e.g., the rocket systems and capability of defending the area, including the use of tunnels for fighting and smuggling.

Israel's use of military force in the Second Lebanon War and Operation Cast Lead set many political processes in motion,<sup>1</sup> which would largely have not occurred had it not been for the use of the ground forces. In the final analysis, these political processes shortened the duration of the fighting because of the direct threat that the ground maneuver created to fundamental components of the organizations, be they military force or other elements on which they rely. Some of the political moves were defined as objects of the war and the operation, but most of them were impossible to anticipate, as is usually the case in the wake of a war. Had the IDF used firepower only and not undertaken a ground maneuver, Hamas would have had the opportunity to hide, resort to its defenses, and use its own military force freely and without constraints. Hamas would also have been able to display its fighting, moves, and soldiers to the media, and produce an impressive show of heroics notwithstanding the pressure of the air strikes against which, as we know, it was prepared. The ground maneuver that took place following the air strikes greatly disrupted Hamas' plans.

The IDF's use of force in Operation Cast Lead, namely the concentrated blows of firepower followed by the ground maneuver, constituted a real threat to Hamas' military force. An analysis of the battles, particularly the disorganized withdrawal of Hamas' military force from the battlefield and from direct contact, leads to this assessment. The Hamas army failed in the very task for which it had prepared, defense of its territory.

This essay examines why the ground maneuver, in conjunction with a disproportionate degree of firepower, was the primary factor in creating a real threat to Hizbollah and Hamas. In addition, the essay explains the logic of the ground maneuver and the basic conditions demanded for its effective use.

### **Area, Defense, Offense, and Guerilla Fighting**

The Gaza Strip is a delimited area surrounded on all sides, with no significant topographical depth. Over the years Hamas made meticulous

preparations to defend this territory by preparing the ground for fighting, organizing command and control mechanisms, and preparing arms, intelligence, and other essential components of the organization's military wing. The painstaking organization of the area, the fortifications, the tunnels, the positions, and the explosive devices are all evidence of the system's permanence and Hamas' intention to defend the area. Such defense is not typical of guerilla warfare, and indicates that the defender is interested in holding the ground over time and views it as critical to its existence. This basic principle of defense doctrine has been around since the dawn of history, and does not require further rationale in terms of seeing the need and vitality of the land for Hamas. Thus, the territory – the land of the Gaza Strip – is vital to Hamas' existence and functioning, and is the reason it has invested significant resources of its military wing in defending the land. The offensive element of the military wing is busy with rocket launch capabilities. Therefore, when the IDF attacked the Hamas defense by means of a concentrated effort combining firepower and the ground maneuver, Hamas' military power was unable to withstand the attack and fulfill its designated function – except for the cells launching the rockets, and even their output was smaller than anticipated (about 30 rockets launches per day, as opposed to the 100 expected; towards the end of the operation the number was down to 16 per day).

A similar phenomenon took place during the ground invasion in the Second Lebanon War. There, neither Hizbollah cells nor forces succeeded in defending their positions, even though the IDF did not concentrate efforts against them beyond the battalion level. Nonetheless, Hizbollah's rocket launching capabilities were much higher until the end of the war, about 200 heavy rockets per day on average, a capability that indicates an organization much stronger militarily than Hamas.

### The "Concentrated Effort" Principle

There is nothing new in the operational requirement to use disproportional force.<sup>2</sup> The idea is an expression of Israel's security concept as defined by David Ben-Gurion in 1949 in *The Army and Defense*: a "strike force" used by Israel as it embarks on war, using all its potential and full force. The derivative of this idea in the IDF's fighting doctrine is the "concentrated

effort” and use of disproportional force to attain a significant operational achievement, a knock-out rather than a victory on points.

The IDF strengthened its deterrence through fighting on the basis of certain principles of war, in particular the notion of concentrated effort. In practice, the phenomenon of war is characterized by the use of disproportionate force. For the sake of comparison, we may look to the use of the “shock and awe” tactic by the Americans in Iraq, particularly in Baghdad in 2003. Disproportional fire lasting around three weeks was used, after which a large ground maneuver was launched.

The difficulty of military action requiring the concentration of operational effort among a civilian population requires that the battlefield be prepared in advance. Preparing targets to be attacked and determining the objectives of the ground maneuver, while making every effort to minimize the harm to civilians and the damage to residences and the greater environment, and warning civilians in advance about the battle zone were all part of IDF activity<sup>3</sup> during Operation Cast Lead. This does not fully prevent damage to the environment and harm to civilians, but because this was an extensive war or military operation, international law allows a nation to defend its citizens when war is forced on it, as happened in the Second Lebanon War and in Operation Cast Lead. After undertaking all of these actions, applying disproportional force is a matter of fighting method. These considerations are measured against the risk to Israeli soldiers and commanders who, in the case of war and according to the IDF’s code of ethics, must risk their lives for a worthy goal. Stopping the missiles and terrorist attacks against Israel was defined by the Israeli government as a “worthy” goal.

The concentration of effort in Operation Cast Lead was conducted according to IDF fighting doctrine, and thus the term “disproportional” must be understood as the concentration of effort by anyone analyzing Operation Cast Lead. The ground maneuver is part of a maneuver including air strikes, ground maneuver, and firepower, intended to deceive and destabilize the guerilla and terrorist organizations. The air strikes on December 28, 2008 took the enemy by complete surprise, as the Gaza Strip had never before absorbed an attack of such force. The ground maneuver that followed, combined with direct auxiliary fire supporting the maneuver, deepened the surprise and created a dilemma for Hamas. It was required to act under the pressure of the advancing

maneuver. Even if Hamas was surprised and seriously harmed by the opening air strike, the intervening time allowed it to regroup; even operational passivity was considered regrouping by Hamas, because its survivability was determined at this stage by the very nature of war and not necessarily as the result of the existence of a prepared program.

The ground maneuver brought the IDF directly to Hamas' doorstep, and in Hamas' view the continuation of the maneuver in its early stages threatened Hamas' existence. Hamas was incapable of stopping the IDF's advancing maneuver. For a guerilla and state-sanctioned terrorist organization like Hamas, the significance was a choice between withdrawing and hiding or fighting and being destroyed. Hamas fought in groups rather than in battalions; it broke into groups and small units, and did not stand up operationally to the IDF's concentrated effort.<sup>4</sup> It withdrew to places where the IDF did not advance, while making extensive use of its ability to melt into the local population and hide in its underground system of tunnels. This greatly contributed to its survival.

The end of the operation questioned Hamas' chances of continuing to operate militarily. Its future existence is in real danger if it faces another IDF ground maneuver of similar force. Hamas consists of terrorists and advisors who understand doctrine and force buildup, even if that force is terrorism and guerilla fighting. There is no way to construct a force that can withstand a maneuver of this kind while in hiding, and there are no land resources in the Gaza Strip that allow for the training of such a force at any measurable level. Assuming that the IDF maintains its maneuvering capability in the future, which is a reasonable assumption, Hamas, Hizbollah, and their supporters may begin to understand the size of the problem before them.

### **Destabilizing the Enemy**

Operation Cast Lead demonstrated that air strikes and ground maneuver play a decisive role in destabilizing Hamas and Hizbollah military power.<sup>5</sup> Hizbollah's military force did not lose its equilibrium during the Second Lebanon War, nor did Hamas' military force during Operation Cast Lead, but had the ground maneuver continued and reached Hamas' essential areas in the depths of its deployment within constructed areas, this would have happened. This is a defined and proven military tactical process.

Loss of equilibrium results from the operational capability demonstrated by the ground maneuver and direct contact with the military forces of Hamas and Hizbollah. In the end, both Hamas and Hizbollah organized their military forces in defined areas and in defensive positions: the ground maneuver capability to operate in direct contact with the enemy on the heels of an air strike and with the simultaneous application of fire deep into the Gaza Strip against all the Hamas defenses turned the ground maneuver of Operation Cast Lead into the decisive component.

One of the definitions of decision is the enemy's loss of the ability to operate effectively against you; Clausewitz also stresses the will to fight, by which he means the loss of the will to fight by the force arrayed against you and not the loss of the organization's capability to remain a terrorist organization.<sup>6</sup> This is an important distinction, because the achievement required of the ground maneuver is not to earn a decision against Hamas or Hizbollah, rather to earn a decision against its operational military force, something definitely possible that depends on the way the attacking military force is operated. It is much harder to gain a decision, especially tactically, against a guerilla organization because of the very nature of guerilla warfare. However, that is not the situation with Hamas or Hizbollah. They have not been guerilla organizations for a long time, rather organizations that operate organized military forces in areas set up for warfare while retaining some irregular tactics. The commander of Division 35, one of the formation commanders of the ground maneuver, accurately describes this outcome from his own experience and the experience of his forces in battle:

The force we applied in the attack did not let them use the means they were most prepared for. Even the noise before the entrance: when you hear noise like that, you don't want to be the enemy on the other side. It shook the entire area. Fighter planes, helicopters, artillery, tanks. I think that's what the enemy was feeling. We came at them from unexpected directions and with such intensity that the terrorists did not stay behind to set off the booby traps they had prepared for us. Wherever we came, there were virtually no people left. The only ones who remained were the very wealthy families who were afraid of abandoning their property, or the very poor who didn't have anywhere to go. The terrorists who had taken over the homes abandoned by

the civilians left explosive devices with wires running from them, ready to set off, in every home. There were RPGs ready to launch, rifles on the ground. Real arms depots, but the intensity with which we entered drove them off. They didn't stick around to use any of it.<sup>7</sup>

This description by the division commander explains what loss of equilibrium looks like on the ground. Such experiences recurred in other formations as well, to the point that it emerges as an actual phenomenon.

Hamas felt the loss of equilibrium during Operation Cast Lead, and managed to catch its breath only with the end of the pressure leveled by the ground maneuver. The operational results described below, together or in part, indicate operational destabilization. The meaning of operational destabilization of the military forces of Hamas and Hizbollah is measurable and quantifiable:

- a. The loss of the organizations' operational command capability – the ability to operate a military force, to launch high trajectory fire, and to defend the villages and towns.
- b. The loss of operational capability in components such as the orders of battle, commanders, and arms.
- c. The loss of trust between commanders of varying ranks at the operational echelon of the organizations.
- d. The loss of cohesion in the organizations' operational units as the result of direct pressure from the attacking forces in the battlefield.

In Operation Cast Lead, the loss of Hamas' equilibrium began only after the ground maneuver, and was expressed primarily by the inability to perform in the amount of time defined; the inability to use primary means of warfare, including the explosives and subterranean systems prepared in advance; the inability to use reserves; and the inability to control the forces under its command. Hamas' fear of being destabilized affected its political action, and one should not be impressed by Khaled Mashal's demonstration of defiance in Syria. In many cases, the gap between Mashal's position and the situation on the ground was muted only thanks to Israel's decision not to conquer the whole of the Gaza Strip, and to be content with merely deterring the organization.

The ground maneuver made a decisive contribution to Hamas' inability to achieve its operational goals. Hamas did not cause serious damage to the IDF or the home front. The end of the ground maneuver



at a relatively early stage allowed Hamas' survival. Hamas remained in control: it was damaged seriously but not fatally.

### Conclusion

Hizbollah and Hamas have changed from terrorist and guerilla organizations to governmental, political, and social entities. Their military forces became institutionalized as a conglomerate<sup>8</sup> of terrorism, guerilla, and regular military force. Subsequently, the territory – the rural and urban landscapes – became a critical component of their comprehensive activity in general and their governance in particular. The conglomerate of institutionalized military force has melded well with the territory component and attempts to implement military methods from the Iranian and Syrian schools. Southern Lebanon, territory controlled by Hizbollah, is where the organization undertakes most of its social, political, and military activities, and the Gaza Strip is the territory where Hamas undertakes the political, state, social, economic, and military components of its governance. The IDF ground maneuver and disproportional fire and its support components in Hamas and Hizbollah territory endangered their ability to exercise control. Had Israeli forces remained in the territory over an extended period of time, they could have pushed Hamas' achievements back many years, to the point of endangering the existence of critical components, such as the military force itself.

Deterrence versus Hizbollah in Operation Cast Lead and setting in motion political processes concerning the Gaza Strip following the campaign stem from the severe damages and real threat created against the continued existence of the territory of Hamas government, i.e., the Gaza Strip, its military force, and the supporting civilian infrastructures. The eight years of attrition that preceded Operation Cast Lead, characterized by rocket launches and retaliatory fire, and local operations by infantry and the armored corps did not set off processes on the scale of those set in motion by the Second Lebanon War and Operation Cast Lead. The eight-year war of attrition that preceded Operation Cast Lead did not pose any sort of threat against the Gaza territory and the organizations. In fact, the terrorist organizations – Fatah and later on Hamas – enjoyed a large measure of freedom of action within their territory both for governing and for launching terrorist and guerilla operations against



Israel, including high trajectory fire and ground operations. The IDF force in Operation Cast Lead, through the concentration of air strikes and the ground maneuver that followed, constituted a real threat against the existence of Hamas' military force. Although it had prepared extensively for this contingency, the Hamas army made a failed attempt at standing the ground.

The situation is similar with regard to Hizbollah. The bombing of Beirut alone – without creating a real threat against southern Lebanon, one of Hizbollah's most important power bases and the place where their territory directly abuts Israel – would not have brought about the deterrence that was tested during Operation Cast Lead. Control of its semi-state in southern Lebanon and direct contact with Israel's northern border are critical Hizbollah territorial assets. The measure of deterrence with regard to Hizbollah – stemming from the concern of losing southern Lebanon, the organization's largest home base – stems from Hizbollah's understanding that the Israeli army would conquer southern Lebanon in any war against it. Preparations against a ground maneuver are proof that this is the case. The complementary measure stems from the concern about disproportional air strikes throughout all of Lebanon that might demote Hizbollah from the status of Lebanon's savior to that of Lebanon's destroyer.

From the Second Lebanon War and Operation Cast Lead one may conclude that an effective ground maneuver in an asymmetrical confrontation requires at least four basic operational conditions for continuous application over the duration of the ground maneuver:

- a. Disproportional operational capability of a ground maneuver in conjunction with air strikes at any required depth in the area of operations, and the capability to concentrate and operate the force as quickly as possible and move the fighting onto Hamas and Hizbollah territory.
- b. Maintaining permanent and continuous multi-organizational capabilities for defending the home front<sup>9</sup> (the IDF Home Front Command, Ministry of Defense, local government and mayors as the local government commanders in time of war or operations, active anti-missile defense capabilities).
- c. Regular continuous capability to apply humanitarian operational efforts on a large scale during and after the fighting.

- d. Regular continuous capability of communications and public relations material for use during and after the fighting.

As an operational and strategic lesson of the Second Lebanon War and Operation Cast Lead, it behooves the IDF to maintain its capability to maneuver on the ground, at any depth required, against future potential asymmetrical threats. The defense establishment of the State of Israel and the IDF must enable basic operational and strategic conditions for ongoing ground fighting. Hence the operational importance of home front defense; humanitarian assistance efforts; and ongoing communications efforts, which are strategic conditions that create internal and external legitimacy and most of all, the time required to complete the operational campaign.

The military force of Hizbollah and Hamas – each in its own way – has consolidated into a conglomerate of a military organization that uses guerilla tactics; applies terrorist and guerilla efforts; uses methods of warfare based on universal military doctrines such as defense and offense with firepower, retreat, and holding; organizes the area in accordance with its doctrine; uses methods of military instruction in military schools; and more. This is the reason that these organizations are caught between the proverbial rock and hard place – maneuver and firepower. Hamas and Hizbollah have become large military organizations that have produced a vast number of objectives and exposed themselves to growing and uncontrollable intelligence penetrations.

These factors explain why the ground maneuver in conjunction with disproportional air strikes creates the primary threat. The ground maneuver, an essential component in applying military force against Hamas and Hizbollah, is neither able nor required to terminate the existence of these organizations. Their deterrence in acting against Israel with their main force components, such as high trajectory fire and terrorism via different terrorist attacks over an extended period of time, is a significant achievement, one that may allow for the development of political conditions favorable to future settlements.

## Notes

- 1 Oded Eran, "Operation Cast Lead: The Diplomatic Dimension," *Strategic Assessment* 11, no. 4 (2009): 13-17.
- 2 Gabriel Siboni, "Disproportionate Force: Israel's Concept of Response in Light of the Second Lebanon War," *INSS Insight* 74, October 1, 2008.

"Israel does not have to be dragged into a war of attrition with Hizbollah. Israel's test will be the intensity and quality of its response to incidents on the Lebanese border or terrorist attacks involving Hizbollah in the north or Hamas in the south. In such cases, Israel again will not be able to limit its response to actions whose severity is seemingly proportionate to an isolated incident. Rather, it will have to respond disproportionately in order to make it abundantly clear that the State of Israel will accept no attempt to disrupt the calm currently prevailing along its borders. Israel must be prepared for deterioration and escalation, as well as for a full scale confrontation ... This approach is applicable to the Gaza Strip as well. There, the IDF will be required to strike hard at Hamas and to refrain from the cat and mouse games of searching for Qassam rocket launchers. The IDF should not be expected to stop the rocket and missile fire against the Israeli home front through attacks on the launchers themselves, but by means of imposing a ceasefire on the enemy."

- 3 Organized preparatory activity of the Department for International Law allowed the IDF, and will continue to allow it in the future, to prepare the battlefield in terms of its legal constraints. The fact that terrorism fights within civilian populations and uses them as human shields makes fighting harder but does not prevent it. Defining orderly operational procedures for staff work that carefully examines the fire targets and the ground maneuver objectives helps commanders fulfill their missions. It is important to understand that the operational response drives the legal requirement and not vice versa. In this matter, the IDF acts systematically and well, and in fact, the number of casualties among the civilians without this work would have been many times higher than the number reported.
- 4 In many cases Hamas cells fled the battlefield. This is similar to the phenomenon that occurred in the Second Lebanon War in every location that the IDF attacked Hizbollah terrorists directly. After the war, Hizbollah held an inquiry into the forces that fled.
- 5 A lack of operational equilibrium means that the force has no capability to function according to its plans and cannot put its missions into practice in an orderly manner. This does not mean that the force ceases to exist, but the fight for survival while lacking equilibrium outweighs dedication to the mission. This is an important step on the road to attaining a decision against the enemy or destroying it.
- 6 Yossi Yehoshua and Reuven Weiss, "So I Have No Dilemma," *Yediot Ahronot*, January 23, 2009. The commander of Division 35 during Operation Cast Lead testified in a newspaper interview after the end of the fighting: "There was no exaggeration in the descriptions ... There were tunnels, there were large explosive devices, there were booby traps such as a dummy of a Hamas fighter in front of an explosive device and a tunnel opening meant

for kidnapping soldiers. At the beginning, they deployed themselves like an army...From a squadron, we turned them into a collections of bands.”

7 Ibid.

8 A conglomerate is a cohesion of sedimentary rock containing different rock fragments in a geological environment. The metaphor is one of joining different components into a single body – a conglomerate of fragments difficult to identify in a body with substance that may be identified and characterized.

9 Meir Elran, “Operation Cast Lead and the Civilian Front: An Interim Assessment,” *INSS Insight* 87, January 5, 2009.