

Asymmetrical Warfare in the Gaza Strip: A Test Case

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The Gaza Strip stretches over a small area of only some 360 sq km. It is 42 km long and 12 km wide at its widest point, though the width of most of the Strip is only 6 km. The population is approximately 1.6 million and the natural annual birthrate is 3.3 percent. More than half the population is below the age of 15. The Gaza Strip has no natural resources; there is not enough land to grow wheat and therefore it cannot provide the most basic of foodstuffs needed by the population. It also has no water. Residents of the Gaza Strip rely on the State of Israel for all aspects of their existence: food, water, electricity, and sewage infrastructures. In every sense the density is typical of crowded, urban areas. In Jabaliya, for example, there are 100,000 people living in a very small area; this was where Israel had to fight when it embarked on Operation Cast Lead in late December 2008. The issue of asymmetry is an element that greatly affects the way Israel confronts the challenges of fighting in Gaza.

When international laws of warfare were formulated, particularly with regard to the Fourth Geneva Convention, World War II served as the model of war between nations. All international laws of warfare rest on the experience accrued in WWII in which the armies of nations fought one another. When analyzing the relative forces of Israel and Hamas, it is obvious that the IDF is the more powerful: it comprises hundreds of thousands of soldiers, thousands of tanks, planes, and ships. By contrast, Hamas is the seemingly weak side, as it has only tens of thousands of combatants and no heavy weapons. Clearly, one would think that when the two sides engage in battle the strong would win out over the weak.

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However, it is also clear that this is simply not the case. It would be a grave mistake to measure the relative force between the sides by taking a superficial view. In fact, because of the weak side's need to confront the strong, Israel is dragged into confrontations on other planes that to a very great extent determine the outcome of the military engagement, not only at the tactical level but also and particularly at the systemic and strategic levels. This is the essence of an asymmetrical conflict.

It therefore behooves us to investigate asymmetry. Asymmetry between entities is measured not only in terms of force but also exists in every aspect in which there is a difference in the nature of the conflicting sides, in their goals, power, methods of operation, and especially the rules of the game by which they play.

Between Israel and Hamas in Gaza there is a deep-seated, inherent asymmetry that pushes the adversaries to a particular and unique form of confrontation in this conflict. Therefore a fundamental mapping of the asymmetry is necessary from the strategic to the tactical levels; at the end of the day, the tactical level is what determines how one fights in the streets. At the strategic level, structurally speaking, Israel is a democratic state that maintains an elected government and institutions and is highly sensitive to public opinion and the media. In the Gaza Strip, by contrast, there is an entity that is not defined as a state that conducts itself on the basis of a single voice. While Israel acts on the basis of Western logic reflecting a multiplicity of ideas and where governance is examined in light of the results of its actions in the here and now, the Gaza Strip has a government with a fundamentalist ideology and is guided by a long term messianic idea for which the people are prepared to make enormous sacrifices. In terms of the goals of a confrontation, while Israel wants to solidify the geo-political reality and attain a peaceful existence, Gaza wants to change reality – wipe out the State of Israel – and is willing to pay the price for doing so. In terms of constraints, while the State of Israel is committed to an accepted statesman-like code of conduct, the entity of Hamas in Gaza writes its own rules and codes. All of this greatly affects the manner of confrontation.

At the systemic level and structurally speaking, Israel has a regular, traditional army that conducts itself on the basis of a Western military code of action. The members of this army are easily recognizable as they wear a uniform. The IDF acts only against military targets and tries to avoid damage to the surroundings. In the Gaza Strip, a force has been constructed

that Israel, for reasons of convenience, designates with terms such as company, battalion, and brigade, but the force is in fact not constructed with recognizable hierarchies. The force is tailor-made and assimilated into its protected civilian environment. It purposely plants itself in civilian homes and institutions and operates on the basis of a code that allows it to present itself alternately as civilian or military, as required by circumstance.

There is also a difference in terms of the rationale of the campaign. According to Israel's approach, fighting should be short and achieve unambiguous results that allow a peaceful existence for the long term, whereas the other side talks of remaining in the existing arenas over time. Hamas tries to achieve a situation that will impose long term limitations on the other side (because no one actually expects Hamas to win against Israel, which is significantly stronger); thus it seeks, slowly but surely, to cripple the other side and make it difficult for it to act. In terms of constraints, Israel is very sensitive to the duration of combat and the effect on the home front as well as the number of casualties on both sides; casualties inflicted on the other side also limit its actions. By contrast, Hamas' main sensitivity is the survivability of its leadership.

At the tactical level and structurally speaking, the IDF is constructed of traditional military units; its operations profile is conspicuous and has a high signature. By contrast, the "units" in the Gaza Strip, which are not at all units in the traditional military sense, use the method of disappearance, i.e., they have a very low signature. This makes it impossible to know if someone is a combatant or not. They operate within the civilian environment networked to allow military action, are located underground with separate communications from the general networks, and have decentralized weapons caches so that they do not have to move arms from place to place. They try to stay far removed from their centers of gravity so that the latter cannot be attacked. In fact, there are many combatants – tens of thousands – who operate in a decentralized manner within the civilian setting, taking advantage of the IDF's constraints so that when they engage the IDF (or Israel's civilian front) the IDF cannot take effective action against them.

In terms of the tactical rationale, Hamas fires high trajectory weapons against the Israeli rear from within densely populated civilian centers, intentionally using the civilians as human shields in order to draw the enemy into sending its infantry and armored corps into urban areas.

Fighting in an urban setting neutralizes the advantages that the strong side seems to have: in Hamas' view, a fighter with a Kalachnikov is equivalent to a fighter facing him with an M-16. Hamas is eager to see many casualties on both sides. Its guiding principle is damaging Israel's resilience and maintaining the determination to fight after having sustained many losses, while at the same time creating a troubling humanitarian picture that will lead to international pressure that will result in the end of the fighting. By contrast, according to Israel's guiding principle, it is necessary to suppress Hamas fire as rapidly as possible (suppress, not stop, because militarily it is very difficult to stop it altogether) and to damage Hamas militarily as much as possible in order to create deterrence for the future. Israel's ending mechanism involves achieving these goals, whereas the Palestinians' ending mechanism is undercutting Israel's legitimacy to act.

Israel's constraints are the relevance of the weapons, the small number of systemic centers of gravity, and clear military targets that can be attacked, as well as the sensitivity to casualties on both sides. By contrast, Hamas' constraints are a function of its difficulty in operating due to Israel's dominance in many spheres.

The question of how Hamas operated in the last confrontation and how it will operate in the future addresses the problem of confrontations in densely populated civilian settings. In Operation Cast Lead, an attempt was made to remove the residents from their homes and relocate them during the fighting. Even though this is a very complex act, it is necessary to take every measure to distinguish between civilians and combatants.

At the tactical level, the first question that must be asked is: who is the enemy? It is very hard to identify the enemy and distinguish the enemy from innocent bystanders. It is also very hard to figure out how the enemy's systems are integrated into the neighborhoods of Gaza: where the major weapons, launch areas, and booby traps are located (after all, these neighborhoods are not the innocent neighborhoods of Tel Aviv). It is very hard to attack such an enemy without causing great harm to the surrounding population. It is difficult to find the military facilities located beneath residential complexes and public institutions and remove them without inflicting significant damage on the surroundings. In order to respond to these problems, Israel has developed special high precision weapons that cause minimal or reduced damage to the surroundings, unlike any weapons used by other armies in the world. The point is not to be

right but rather to be smart. In addition, it is necessary to find the enemy's centers of gravity that, once destroyed, would relieve the IDF of the need to send in ground troops (as using ground troops portends damage that is almost impossible to avoid). The IDF is obligated to protect its personnel, and it is very hard to do so when fighting an entity that labors not to have any centers of gravity.

IDF forces face great challenges when fighting in urban areas. It is necessary to keep track of one's forces at all times – a group in this room and a squad in another apartment in the building. Because the surroundings are complex, it is necessary to spread out the forces, and this poses a challenge for controlling them. It is also necessary to clear residences that house both civilians and terrorists, and this is true of many neighborhoods. The challenge is to maintain activity that is coordinated among all the forces, e.g., to operate covering fire for maneuvering forces, while avoiding damage to the surroundings. Even though the IDF has found solutions involving different levels of authorization and different types of weapons for various situations, the challenge remains enormous. Some additional difficult questions are: how do you manage the civilian sphere in which the enemy intertwines civilian activities with booby traps? How do you ensure axes of logistics and evacuation? Another challenge is distinguishing between civilians and terrorists. The IDF must communicate with the population and remove it from the battlefield. At the end of the day the full responsibility for caring for the population in the areas that the army has taken control of falls to the IDF: it has to care for it and supply it with food and water. It is also necessary to cooperate with international organizations so that they can fulfill their function while remaining safe as they operate on the battlefield itself.

Politically, the major challenge lies in clearly and unambiguously articulating the goals of the operation before it is begun, to avoid a situation in which the goal is changed midway through the action. For example, several ideas were raised during Operation Cast Lead for changing its objective, even though the operation was underway and had evolved in a certain direction to attain particular goals. Another challenge is attaining the political conditions that make it possible to embark on the mission, and ensuring the operational sphere of action required to conduct and end it. This point is of the utmost importance.

The media and communications are another challenge. It is necessary to set in motion a national information campaign in order to create and maintain internal and international public legitimacy to ensure the time and space required to attain the operation's goals.

There is also a legal challenge. It is necessary to conduct a joint national legal campaign to create the room needed for operating before embarking on a mission in order to conduct it properly and reap its fruits later on. Therefore, jurists must come down from their ivory tower and enter the real world and get to work. This is a battlefield just like any other. In this respect too, it is necessary to wage a national campaign to create the proper environment for action and take advantage of the enemy's weaknesses and capitalize on them, while at the same providing proper protection to one's forces, as it is inconceivable that the enemy should be allowed to do whatever it pleases without having to pay a price (in terms of achieving its goals).

Militarily there is also the challenge of intelligence gathering before going into battle in order to make it possible to destroy targets massively and damage centers of gravity while avoiding collateral damage to non-involved civilians. The challenges are sending in ground forces while dictating the pace, reaching the targets, avoiding losses to the IDF and of course the non-involved population (this is not merely a legal but also a moral matter, and I believe all share this goal), and suppressing Hamas fire while ensuring a proper balance between achieving the goals and operating on the basis of the international law.

In my opinion there is a need to formulate a Fifth Geneva Convention because the Fourth has lost much of its relevance. We must operate in a way that will ensure few civilian casualties and of course the welfare of our troops. The last challenge is dictating the unilateral withdrawal and its timing, as was done in Operation Cast Lead.

Operation Cast Lead: A Test Case

Until November 2008, Israel faced alternating periods of rocket fire and *tahdiya* (calm) from Gaza, and all the while Hamas grew significantly stronger. After some 400 rockets were fired towards Israel during November and December 2008, the State of Israel was forced to enter the Gaza Strip, even though it was not keen on doing so. The enemy had 20,000 fighters in place and weapons that included light weapons, anti-

tank and anti-aircraft weapons, batteries, rockets, and mortar bombs. The objective of the operation was to damage Hamas severely and reduce the rocket fire and hostile terrorist activity emanating from the Gaza Strip in order to strengthen the country's deterrence and create the conditions for improving the security situation of the south, as well as prevent the conflict from spreading to other arenas. The goal was not to conquer the area in order to remain there, but to inflict massive damage on Hamas, create deterrence, and then leave the Strip. From Hamas' perspective, the end of the fighting was exhausting Israel's legitimacy to operate against the organization and seeing the IDF withdraw from the area. In accordance with the mission charged by the IDF, the Southern Command defined three goals by which it would be possible to say if it had completed the mission: stopping Hamas fire, damaging the organization, and strengthening Israel's deterrence.

The operation lasted 22 days. It began with an opening strike in which dozens of targets were attacked within 3 minutes and 40 seconds, in order to attain the effect of devastating damage and cause a state of shock. Subsequently, dozens of launch areas were hit in order to damage the launchers or remove them out of Israel's range. Later, fire was directed at hundreds of targets for a full week. In total, more than one thousand targets were attacked during the operation. The second stage was the maneuver, sending in ground troops and assisting with covering fire. The last stage was the unilateral withdrawal and redeployment. The ground troops were sent only to the area of Gaza and remained in encircling positions only, while the diversion in the south prevented Hamas from concentrating its force in any one location.

The operation began on December 27, 2008, and lasted until January 18, 2009. During the operation, 730 rockets were fired at Israel, and it was easy to see a steady effect of rocket suppression to zero in the last days of the operation. Hamas failed to launch rockets despite its significant efforts and lost its most senior commanders in charge of the rocket launch apparatus. On the Israeli side there were few casualties; most were the result of friendly fire typical of urban warfare. The IDF has a list of 709 terrorists who were killed and belonged to one terrorist organization or another. In the fighting, 295 non-involved civilians were killed (elderly, women, and children under the age of 16), and 162 whose involvement was unclear. A ratio of 75 percent terrorists to 25 percent civilians is generally considered

by Western armies to be a good result in urban warfare. This outcome was achieved thanks to two factors: the first was psychological warfare, which included taking control of Gaza's TV and radio broadcasting and broadcasting messages, as well as making calls to civilians' homes (in total, 290,000 calls were answered), during which civilians were instructed how to behave; the second was the extensive use of high precision weapons.

In conclusion, we must ask ourselves whether the State of Israel achieved its goals and how it met these challenges at the tactical level and the systemic level, and more explicitly, whether Operation Cast Lead achieved the deterrence it sought and whether it left room for more fighting in the future. In my opinion, the answer to both questions is yes.