From the State Comptroller's Report on Operation Protective Edge to the Next Campaign

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On February 28, 2017, the State Comptroller's Office issued its report on Operation Protective Edge, regarding Israel's handling of the attack tunnels and the cabinet's decision making processes before the operation and at its outset. The media and public discourse subsequent to the report's release focused mainly on the IDF's lapses in dealing with the tunnels and the claim that the Prime Minister, Defense Minister, and senior IDF leadership presented the threat to the security cabinet in a way that did not allow cabinet members to perform qualitative decision making.

Nearly two-thirds of the report is devoted to the tunnels, an emphasis disproportionate to the real weight of the threat in the overall campaign and in its emerging trends. In contrast, there is a glaring absence – both in the report and in the public debates surrounding it – of fundamental components of national security in the context of the operation: Israel's policy and strategic objectives vis-à-vis Gaza; mitigation of risks of igniting future conflagrations; the role of the military effort in realizing the required political achievement during the fighting; the political-military discourse and learning processes of the top decision makers in Israel; and, finally, the match, or rather, mismatch, between the means of the Comptroller's critique and tools and professional approach to the topics in the report.

As to Israel's policy, the report quotes some members of the cabinet: "No long term objective about Gaza was defined that could have driven Operation Protective Edge. Rather, it was necessary to consolidate the overall concept, i.e., the long term objective, in advance, so that in the course of the operation, it would have been possible to adapt its goals to that long term objective."

It is obvious why the cabinet is loath to hold policy discussions and define measurable political objectives that can be benchmarks when subsequently judging its members as statesmen and politicians. However, even though there was no discussion before the fighting to determine Israel's objectives and policy vis-à-vis Gaza, Israel's overt conduct delineates that policy: accepting the rule of Hamas over the Gaza Strip without officially recognizing it as the legitimate address; maintaining the military, economic, and political pressure on the Gaza Strip

to weaken Hamas and impede its military buildup; and through deterrence, decreasing the active military threat the Gaza Strip poses to Israel. These bespeak an understanding that continued rule by Hamas – which is both a restraining ruler that may be held responsible and a hostile terrorist entity that cannot be considered a possible partner to political arrangements – serves current Israeli policy in the Palestinian arena, both security-wise and politically, at least for the short and mid terms. At the same time, and despite Israel's partial success in slowing down Hamas's military buildup (tunnels, rockets, and so on), were Israel to topple Hamas it would be saddled with higher costs than it is prepared to pay in terms of worsened security, and especially in terms of the burden involved in direct renewed Israeli control of the Gaza Strip and its two million residents, which would require resources equivalent to those of a major, broad-scoped, multi-year national project.

Given this overt policy, it is possible to understand why the cabinet, even during Operation Protective Edge, avoided defining the overthrow of Hamas as the campaign's political objective, thereby changing the nature of the mission from one of deterrence to a mission of military decisive outcome by means of occupying the Gaza Strip. Therefore, the stated objective of the operation was to restore the security calm with no change in the political situation and end the fighting under conditions acceptable to Israel at minimal costs. The required military achievements included damage to Hamas's military capabilities and pressure on Hamas's leadership to end the fighting.

In this vein the IDF conducted its defensive efforts in the air (mostly against rockets), on land, at sea, and in cyberspace, and its offensive efforts with standoff fire, including damaging the tunnels to impede Hamas's ability to use them offensively during the operation. After ten days, during which the pressure on Hamas to agree to end the fighting had not yet borne fruit, and after Hamas carried out several attacks through tunnels, the IDF embarked on a limited ground maneuver to intensify the pressure on Hamas to end the fighting, and to damage the tunnels the IDF knew about to prevent their use during the operation. At the end of this stage, after sufficient achievements regarding the tunnels were attained, the IDF once again focused on standoff fire efforts until the final ceasefire was achieved.

Current Israeli policy, as well as its defense doctrine and IDF strategy, hold that postponing the next confrontation with the Gaza Strip is a key objective that must be realized through the combined use of security, political, and economic tools. The Comptroller's report refers to statements to this effect made by then-Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon and notes that it would have been proper to hold a debate on the state of the Gaza Strip infrastructures. However, in a situation in which it was clear that neither side to the confrontation wanted it in the first place, it was more important to analyze the practical contribution of the policy to the achievement of the goal or the failure to achieve it. On this point, among the factors affecting the volatility of the situation and the risks of escalation, central roles are played by Israel's measures in the economic

and civilian realms on the one hand, and its policy of response to hostile actions on the other; it would be wise to weight them more proportionately in analyzing the decision making processes.

On the connection between the political goals and the military operational planning, the report quotes one of the cabinet members: "The cabinet discussion about Israel's Gaza Strip strategy took place only after the cabinet was presented with the IDF's operational plans for the Gaza Strip sector. It is therefore clear that these plans were not based on the strategic objectives, which were only set afterwards." The report continues: "It would have been correct for the cabinet to first determine the strategic objectives whereby the IDF would have prepared its operational plans to achieve those objectives."

The military-political discourse is required in order to bring together political objectives and military achievements in a fruitful, multi-stage process that distinguishes between desirable and possible objectives, existent and non-existent and suitable and less suitable military means, and the respective costs. The interaction between them is not linear ("first political objectives, then military plans"), but rather interactive, recurring, and mutually developing.

Operational plans are a tool for rendering planning more efficient, and are meant to be the theoretical foundation for the formulation of concepts and force buildup in routine times, for developing possible courses of action without a particular context in mind, outlining them terms of ORBAT, space, time, manners of action, and regulating command and control. The implementation of military operations is regulated by an operational order, possibly based on the operational plans or components thereof, but the latter must consider the unique context of the operation and must be adapted to the specific circumstances, capabilities, and precise characteristics of the emerging situation, including political objectives that are defined ad hoc, whether explicitly or implicitly. Therefore, operational plans should be developed against all the military achievements that may have to be attained on "D-day" and must thus serve as the basic building blocks in the political-military discourse about the capability for realizing political objectives by military means.

Therefore, the very existence of policy discussions – important in and of itself – is not a prerequisite for planning relevant military operations, but is indispensable for reducing gaps in understanding and matching the expectations of the military and political echelons, and is critical for executing the operations. The most important element in this context is not the order in which the discussions are held (first the political objectives and only then the military planning), but rather completing the dialogue before going into action in a way that allows the formulation of a common language, the clarification of the political objectives, the definition of the military achievement needed to attain them, the ability to realize the required achievements and gaps therein, and the synchronization of the military, political, and other efforts as part of the overall national effort.

A key assertion in the report is that "significant and necessary information that cabinet ministers must have to make optimal decisions…was not brought to the ministers' attention satisfactorily in the meetings prior to Operation Protective Edge." Most, though not all, responsibility for that lapse is placed on the IDF and the defense intelligence branch (AMAN), the Defense Minister, and the Prime Minister. While the report expresses the expectation that ministers will demand expanded explanations on issues they do not understand, it insists repeatedly that the failure to present data at cabinet discussions prevented cabinet members from effectively discussing fateful issues.

This claim is flawed in several respects. One, the responsibility for learning and acquiring the necessary knowledge is, first and foremost, that of the cabinet ministers themselves, with the National Security Council, the security services, and the Intelligence services required to respond, support, and assist them do so as much as possible, and not the other way around. According to the report, even when intelligence materials were placed at the disposal of the ministers, they did not make time to read them; and when the IDF and the NSC proposed a program of study ("100 Days") for the cabinet ministers as soon as the cabinet was formed, the invited ministers did not bother to show up. Two, the scope of knowledge required for reaching responsible decisions in the various theaters of operations (the Gaza Strip, as well as Israel's northern theater, Iran, and elsewhere) cannot be acquired in a few meetings or through incidental reading. It requires a significant investment of time, a difficulty for all cabinet members who – as the report itself stresses – also head large executive ministries and political parties. Three, the report asserts that among the considerations for not presenting sensitive details in the cabinet is the appalling phenomenon of leaks and breaches of secrecy about these discussions, a fact that is an ethical failure but also one that requires a legal response and strict enforcement, as it cripples the political-security debate within the government body charged with holding it. Parenthetically, the very fact that the report relies on the presentation of topics in cabinet debates to one degree or another as a means to measure the quality of the decision making is problematic, because participants in the forum well know that the attendance of the cabinet members in the forum has seldom been full or uninterrupted, a factor not in the least examined by the report. In a broader context, it would be appropriate to ask if the Comptroller's team approached its task with the right tools for analyzing the topic at hand, given the unique features of political-military decision making during a confrontation.

Operation Protective Edge was not Israel's first campaign against the Gaza Strip, and will likely not be the last. Based on the Comptroller's report, i.e., what it contains but especially what it lacks, the following changes are proposed to improve Israel's ability to confront the challenges of the future, in terms of the policy dimension, preparedness, and the mechanisms of learning and national decision making.

Cabinet members must proactively strive for sufficient expertise on issues about which they may have to make decisions. They must set aside time for routine reading of intelligence, military, and political materials, complete the intensive curricula prepared by the security establishment ("the 100-Day Program") as soon as possible, and maintain a routine that includes visits, discussions, and learning in units, arrays, and command centers, as well as in the political and diplomatic arenas. In this context, there is great significance in attending drills and simulations of emergencies, which very rarely receive any significant attention from the political echelon.

Past experience indicates that ministers who head small ministries (Intelligence and Strategic Affairs) and ministers without portfolios have more time to study security matters in depth, a fact that will be significant when a conflict erupts. Given understandable political and coalition considerations, it would be proper for the government and the Prime Minister to consider balancing the composition of the cabinet and the burden placed on its members so that more of them will be able to attain sufficient expertise on issues about which they will be required to make decisions.

The ministerial Security Cabinet must maintain an extensive routine of discussions to shape policies relevant to the theaters where military confrontations are liable to occur, both for the sake of maximizing the chance of postponing such confrontations and for the sake of improving decision making preparedness. These theaters are chiefly the Gaza Strip and Lebanon, the former because of its volatility and the latter because of the severity of the threat it poses. Expertise in those theaters is what the decision makers need now, before any escalation occurs. The discussions should deal with intelligence assessments, existing and required operational plans, existing military capabilities and what must yet be acquired, Israel's interests and policies to promote them, possible purposes of military operations to attain political objectives, and the non-military efforts Israel must expend to promote the achievement of the purposes. A cool-headed and informed clarification of the general political objectives and the ways to attain them before a single shot has been fired would greatly improve the possibility of reducing gaps in understanding and expectations among government ministers and between the political and military echelons.

Current conditions in the Gaza Strip strongly resemble those that prevailed before Operation Protective Edge, as the Gaza Strip's infrastructure crisis is growing worse, Hamas's economic woes are readily apparent, its new political leadership leans more toward the military wing, exchanges of blows and warnings based on patterns of actions and reactions are widening and increasingly frequent, and the risk of escalation grows. The tactical level has a life of its own, even when the strategic interests of the sides do not support initiating wide scale fighting. Both in the Second Lebanon War and in Operation Protective Edge, operational events on the ground led to widespread and prolonged fighting, as the tactical tail wagged the strategic dog. All of this only heightens the urgency in accelerating the focus of the top political and military leaderships

both on postponing the confrontation as much as possible and on optimal preparedness for a breakout, if and when it comes.

History shows that the chances that these recommendations will be heeded are slim, and it is therefore reasonable to assume that similar lessons will be sounded in the future. Still, and at the risk of being cast as naive, the context invites a paraphrase of David Ben-Gurion's statement about IDF commanders and its application to Israel's ministers, so that "every Jewish mother may know that she has entrusted her children's fate to the hands of cabinet members who are worthy of this mandate" in their actions, learning, and preparations.