



INSS Insight No. 925, May 7, 2017

The Next Round in the Gaza Strip: Act Urgently to Avoid it, and Prepare for its Outbreak

Assaf Orion

On April 19, 2017, in a meeting of the State Control Committee on the State Comptroller's report concerning Operation Protective Edge, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu reportedly said, "My intention at that time was to avoid war as far as possible," but after the three teenagers were kidnapped, "we were slipping on a slope and couldn't stop, however hard we tried." He said that the Cabinet discussed two operational alternatives: entry up to the tunnel openings or the conquest of Gaza:

This dilemma remains relevant...Without complete occupation you won't solve the problem...And even if you occupy, there are prices to pay...The weakness of occupation is not only the price exacted of our soldiers and their civilians, but of who will take over and who will manage it. Are we discussing these possibilities? Yes. Will we do this? We have a few alternatives...I cannot rid the Middle East around me of these murderous ideologies...So I must build the capability to repel them, to deter them, or to ensure a decisive victory if hostilities are forced upon us. That is our strategy...We must renew and refuel our deterrence. As per my policy, I will not accept drizzles [of rockets].

The Prime Minister's remarks reflect Israel's current policy: to accept Hamas rule in the Gaza Strip without formally recognizing it; to deter Hamas from attacking Israel, and frustrate its efforts to do so and to enhance its military force; and to prevent Hamas from taking over the West Bank. In the short term this policy seeks to prevent the next clash, but this at the cost of allowing Hamas, in the medium and long term, to become established as a significant political and governing element in the Palestinian system, promoting its Islamist world view and denying Israel's right to exist. Resolving the tension between the short term and the long term in Israeli policy, with its risks and advantages, requires a broad, separate discussion. However, the Prime Minister's remarks speak to the main challenges posed by the existing policy: postponing the next conflict in Gaza, defining its objectives, and preparing for it.

As to delaying the next round of hostilities, the Prime Minister's words illustrate the difficulty of preventing escalation, in the attempt to balance between the elements that accelerate deterioration to conflict and those that slow down the process, and the various considerations underlying the respective options. His statements correctly reflect a reality in which Israel and Hamas were not interested in broad conflict. However, the basis of the escalation to Protective Edge was the significant economic distress in Gaza, which Israel did not do enough to relieve, such as an arrangement to transfer salaries through the UN – a measure that was blocked by the opposition of some Cabinet ministers. The escalation was also

driven by Israel's moves against Hamas in the West Bank, operational activities by Hamas, and the dynamic of mutual responses.

It is disturbing that the preoccupation with decisions taken three years ago is not translating into the current public discussion necessary in view of the Israel-Gaza reality. The Prime Minister is still not interested in a violent clash, but the factors accelerating such hostilities are increasing: growing pressure from the head of the Palestinian Authority on Hamas, reflected in salary cuts to PA employees, the announcement of the cessation of funding for electricity in the Strip, and reduction in the resources allocated to the area. These measures exacerbate the Strip's already difficult economic distress; a growing shortage of drinking water; cuts in electricity to less than 8 hours a day due to the end of funding from Qatar; extensive unemployment, particularly among the young; lagging repairs of the damage caused by the previous round of fighting; challenges to Hamas from even more radical factions and increasing Hamas efforts to launch terror attacks in and from the West Bank; and of course the development of the Hamas tunnel project and the IDF efforts to discover and destroy them. These join the sharpening rivalry between the PA and Hamas, the new leadership in Gaza which rose from the ranks of the military arm, the season's memorial days (Independence Day and the "Nakba", the Six Day War and the "Naksa"), Ramadan, and the return of the summer. Against all these, Israel, on the recommendation of the defense establishment, continues to promote steps to reduce the distress that fuels escalation, but too slowly, due to a combination of political barriers and tactical security considerations. Israel's responses to the pattern of attacks from Gaza, although intended to maintain deterrence, also have the potential for escalation. The bottom line of this balance is the growing probability of additional fighting between Israel and Gaza, although Israel does not want it, and probably neither does Hamas.

Just as the previous campaign erupted and ran its course against the wishes of the parties involved, it could well erupt again. Nor are the next campaign's course and objectives not subject to the wishes of the Israeli government only. The Prime Minister's words express a deep understanding of the ramifications for Israel of conquering Gaza, involving not only the cost of the fighting, but also entailing the heavy economic burden of directly ruling over another two million Palestinians, maintaining IDF forces there for years, losing the political and strategic gains of the disengagement (notwithstanding its shortcomings), and incurring other political costs. However, his words also signal the possibility of a future campaign being decisive. Before taking office, Defense Minister Liberman stated that the next war in Gaza must be the last for Hamas, and since then he has reiterated that in the next campaign Israel must "go in with full force and not stop until the other side raises the white flag and cries 'gewald (help).'" Thus either intentionally or in the wake of the unfolding conflict, Israel might expand its military campaign to capture the Strip and/or topple the Hamas regime.

The actions Israel must take to slow down escalation, in addition to maintaining deterrence and responding to the tunnel threat, include prompt, urgent moves to relieve the severe economic distress in Gaza and prevent the emerging humanitarian crisis. Israel should work with regional partners (such as the Gulf states) and international partners to ease the salary crisis, while limiting the risk of Hamas diverting the money for its own needs; allow more exports from Gaza; promote as quickly as possible infrastructure solutions in the areas of water, power (electricity, gas), employment (industrial zones), and housing; facilitate civilians' controlled exit from Gaza abroad through Israel (including the option of special aviation solutions) and also, by arrangement, through Egypt; grant work permits in Israel; promote the

construction of another goods crossing (at Erez), in view of the overload at Kerem Shalom, and build a railway infrastructure to transport cargo to Gaza from Ashdod Port, after security checks. Although these steps conflict with Israel's desire to weaken Hamas and with other security considerations (limiting Hamas's military buildup and preventing terror attacks), they must be considered against the growing risk of a broad conflict with much higher costs than any single terrorist attack, and the consequences of most military buildup efforts in current conditions. Israel must take the initiative in these matters and improve the situation in the Gaza Strip out of considerations of its own national security, even and despite the difficulties mounted by the Palestinian Authority for reasons that do not serve Israel and may even be working toward another outbreak of hostilities between Israel and Hamas.

Regarding preparations for the next round of fighting and the overall situation, basic demands for policymaking at the national level should be reiterated. Israel's policy on the Gaza Strip for both the short and long term must be discussed in the wider context of the Palestinian theater as a whole, and in view of ties between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. Israel's preparations for the next campaign must include not only military preparations, which we can assume are already underway in the IDF, but also military-political preparations by the government, learning processes for the Cabinet ministers, discussions of preliminary preparations, and other measures to narrow the familiar gaps in the work of the Cabinet. These preparations must include a discussion of various alternatives for policy and action, the challenges of conducting the campaign, and its termination mechanisms. Scenarios must be discussed in which the government orders the IDF to capture Gaza and/or topple the Hamas regime, perhaps even contrary to Israel's original intent and national interest. In view of the serious consequences of direct Israeli rule over Gaza, the government of Israel should embark now ("better late than never") on a long term, patient, cautious, but essential process of helping to build acceptable Palestinian capability to run Gaza, to replace Hamas when the time comes and conditions are ripe. The slight parliamentary and public attention currently paid to the Gaza Strip should focus on learning the practical lessons of Operation Protective Edge in view of today's challenges: to postpone further unwanted fighting as far as possible, and to prepare thoroughly for the possibility that it will occur against our will, once more.