

The Hamas Military Buildup

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Notwithstanding the existing tension between Hamas's political wing and the organization's military wing, Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, over strategic priorities, and in tandem with the ongoing and concentrated effort invested by the military wing in military buildup, there is general agreement throughout the organization on the question of a direct conflict with Israel at the present time. The consensus is that under current conditions, particularly in view of the scale of the casualties and destruction in the Gaza Strip during Operation Protective Edge, another round of fighting now is not in the organization's interest. Hamas's military infrastructure was severely damaged in the 2014 conflict, and the Gaza population is in dire straits due to the damage caused to residential buildings and infrastructure. The overall economic situation is extremely difficult, and public criticism is directed at Hamas for inciting a conflict with Israel. Added to these constraints are the restrictions imposed by Egypt on the movement of residents to and from the Gaza Strip in the framework of its struggle against Hamas itself, and as part of its conflict with jihadists active in the Sinai Peninsula, particularly Wilayat Sinai, identified with the Islamic State. The region's economy has also been affected by the obstruction of the smuggling tunnels on the border between Egypt and the Gaza Strip.

In order to avoid another conflict with Israel, Hamas has taken action to prevent attacks against Israel by the jihad factions operating in the Gaza Strip, and the organization has even established a restraining force that prevents shooting incidents from the border area with Israel or makes arrests if shooting incidents occur. Under these conditions, along with the strengthening of the terrorist infrastructure in East Jerusalem and the West Bank,¹ and the permission granted for controlled popular demonstrations in the proximity of the border fence between the Gaza Strip and Israel for

the purpose of letting off steam,² Hamas is devoting its efforts to a military buildup and rebuilding its infrastructure of tunnels in the Gaza Strip. This infrastructure is intended for use if and when another round of conflict develops between the organization and Israel.

Principles of Force Buildup

The buildup of force relies on an understanding of the asymmetry between Hamas and Israel and the organization's effort to compensate for its military inferiority. Hamas seeks to develop capabilities that will attack Israel's weak points and shape rules of the game that will keep Israel from taking advantage of its military edge as the organization targets Israel's technological superiority, modern economy, and the desire of its citizens for a high quality of life. Consequently, Hamas has invested efforts to develop high trajectory weaponry and an air and naval force. It seeks to expand its underground range by digging attack tunnels under the Gaza Strip border with Israel and command and control tunnels that will enable it to disrupt ordinary life in Israel, damage essential infrastructure, lengthen the conflict, and drag Israel into a military response that will expose it to international pressure and domestic criticism.

The logic in Hamas's force buildup is the same as that guiding Hezbollah in its force buildup in Lebanon, which advocates positioning of military infrastructure in population centers; the use of civilians, including children and teenagers, as human shields for terrorist operatives; combat against the IDF from residential buildings and public institutions; the use of civilian ambulances to evacuate operatives; rocket and mortar fire directed against Israeli population centers; and training, exercises, and military demonstrations to improve the operational fitness of the organization's members and raise morale. In many cases, these actions are conducted in population centers in order to prevent an Israeli attack.³

The Buildup following Operation Protective Edge

It is estimated that Hamas's military forces include 16,000 soldiers, in addition to 16,000 members of the security organs, some of whom are attached to the military forces in times of need.⁴ In Operation Protective Edge, Hamas's military forces contained six territorial divisions. Elite units, airborne forces (small UAVs, larger UAVs, and drones), and a naval force were established.

The military forces also included special units specializing in high trajectory weapons, air defense, and smuggling.

In Operation Protective Edge, Hamas concealed its rocket launchers and command and control capabilities in tunnels. As such, it was able to maintain functional continuity during all 50 days of fighting and use the attack tunnels infrastructure to penetrate Israeli territory to carry out attacks and set ambushes for forces. In the meantime, defensive tunnels in the Gaza Strip were used in order to surprise IDF ground forces with the use of explosive devices, anti-tank fire, and kidnapping soldiers.⁵ In addition, during the fighting, Hamas launched continuous rocket barrages at diverse targets in Israel in an attempt to penetrate the Iron Dome defensive layer; tried to launch rockets at strategic targets, such as Ben Gurion Airport, and to a limited extent at the nuclear reactor in Dimona; and fired mortar shells at Israeli communities bordering the Gaza Strip and the entry points for the IDF (after it became clear that long range rocket fire was not having the expected effect).⁶

The ground forces: In order to prepare its combat force, Hamas conducts intensive maneuvers, with an emphasis on penetrating Israel, attacking Israeli targets, and kidnapping soldiers. Together with rebuilding its regular force, there are efforts to improve the military fitness of the security organs and train popular militias and youth frameworks as an auxiliary force for the regular army.⁷

One of the significant attack capabilities being developed by Hamas is an elite unit – the Nakba Force. The purpose of this unit is to carry out attacks in Israeli territory through the attack tunnels. The force, which numbers 5,000 soldiers, also practices defensive operations in the Gaza Strip. The troops train intensively, and are equipped with more advanced and precise weapons.⁸ The maneuvers focus on penetration of Israeli territory, assaults on IDF positions or patrols, killing of soldiers and destruction of weapons, and retreats through the tunnels with captured IDF soldiers or soldiers' bodies for use as bargaining chips in order to obtain the release of Palestinian prisoners.⁹

Repairing the tunnel system: Hamas has two tunnel systems. One, located within the Gaza Strip, is used to ensure command and control if the IDF is in the area and threatens infrastructure above ground. It is used to attack IDF forces, to transport combatants from place to place and conceal combatants, and to store equipment and weapons. The second is a system of attack tunnels

crossing the border into Israeli territory. These tunnels are designed to allow soldiers to move into Israeli territory, while bypassing the border fence and IDF activity along the border, with the aim of gaining control over IDF positions or patrols and carrying out terrorist attacks in Israel with attacks that will make a major public impact.¹⁰

During Operation Protective Edge, the IDF uncovered 100 kilometers of tunnels in the Gaza Strip and neutralized 32 attack tunnels, a third of which extended into Israeli territory.¹¹ It was also reported that Hamas had put to death dozens of tunnel diggers, fearing that they would disclose the location of the tunnels.¹² Following Operation Protective Edge, Hamas assigned hundreds of members to dig new tunnels and repair those that had been destroyed. The digging took place seven days a week, at all hours of the day and night. Hamas reportedly invests about \$40 million a year in the tunnels project and employs some 1,500 operatives from its various area divisions in digging tunnels. The average wage for a digger varies between \$250 and \$400 a month, which is considered a relatively high wage in the Gaza Strip. The diggers also receive bonuses and incentives for meeting the timetables set by the military leadership in the Gaza Strip, and their pay increases according to seniority.¹³ It is estimated that Hamas has already invested hundreds of millions of dollars in the tunnels project, and it has been claimed that this constitutes most of the organization's budget.¹⁴

In April 2016, the IDF uncovered a Hamas attack tunnel in Israeli territory, and neutralized it in a controlled manner.¹⁵ A month later, in May 2016, the IDF discovered another attack tunnel in Israeli territory. IDF sources asserted that they did not know whether the tunnel was dug before or after Operation Protective Edge, but the tunnel was discovered to be usable.¹⁶

The tunnel-digging project is based on the realization that the pace of digging should be stepped up as long as Israel has no comprehensive technological solution to the challenge of locating the tunnels.¹⁷ At the same time, the effort to move ahead with it is encountering another obstacle: between early 2016 and mid 2017, some 20 tunnels collapsed in the Gaza Strip, killing approximately twenty members of Hamas and Islamic Jihad. It is believed that the tunnels' collapse was caused by natural factors, rain, or unknown actions by Israel. Speculation about Israel's involvement in the collapse of the tunnels was supported when tunnels continued to collapse at a higher rate during the summer, when there was no rain. On March 22,

2017, in a hearing of the Knesset State Control Committee, the IDF Chief of Staff confirmed that the IDF had attacked tunnels on the Gaza Strip border after Operation Protective Edge, using a new method.¹⁸

Military infrastructure along the border with Israel: Following Operation Protective Edge, Hamas built a series of positions several hundred meters from Israel's security fence. Lookout towers were built near them and manned by members of Hamas's military wing, and a road was paved next to the fence. The line of outposts improves Hamas's ability to enforce its policy on the jihad factions active in the Gaza Strip, which seek to incite escalation. Enforcement is carried out in part by a special military and security force called the "Restraining Force." At the same time, the new line enables Hamas to monitor IDF actions along the border relatively effectively, improve regular security, and initiate offensive operations from close to the border with Israel when deemed necessary.¹⁹

The naval arm: According to IDF naval intelligence, a Hamas commando unit has been equipped with dozens of diving kits, among the most advanced in the world, giving its frogmen the ability to dive to various depths for up to four hours. Hamas's commandos are also equipped with advanced computerized diving watches, and even scooters (miniature tools for moving about underwater) that increase their diving distance and enable them to reach the Israeli coast more quickly, leaving the diver with enough strength to fight later on the land.²⁰ During Operation Protective Edge, divers from the Hamas commando unit succeeded in penetrating Israeli territory from the sea when five divers emerged near the Zikim beach. They were spotted immediately by IDF lookouts and killed by combat soldiers who arrived at the scene,²¹ but only after being on the beach for 40 minutes. One of them managed to attach an explosive device to a tank. The device exploded, but caused no casualties.²²

The unit has multiplied its forces since Operation Protective Edge, and now has many dozens of trained combat soldiers, who are young and highly motivated to take advantage of the underwater dimension to deliver a strategic blow against Israel in the next war in the Gaza Strip. It is believed that Hamas is planning to have its commandos launch weapons at close range, possibly advanced anti-tank missiles aimed at the power plant in southern Ashkelon, with the objective of causing damage that will be photographed, thereby giving Hamas a victory photo shot. Another possibility is diving to reach

the area between Ashkelon and Ashdod, quietly coming up on the beach, and launching missiles from the land at a trading ship coming to anchor at Ashdod Port, with the aim of paralyzing Israel marine trade during the fighting.²³ In August 2016, the IDF revealed an aerial photo of a marina built for the naval unit of Hamas's military wing, including a supervision and lookout tower. A senior Israeli navy source explained that Hamas's naval commando unit was liable to use this infrastructure in future operational missions and training.²⁴

The air arm: Hamas's array of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) was established a decade ago on the basis of knowledge acquired in Iran and Syria.²⁵ The architect of the plan was Hamas leader Adnan al-Ghoul, who was killed by Israel in 2004. The array includes UAVs that probably cannot carry standard weaponry; it may be possible, however, to load explosives on them in improved fashion, and they are capable of photography missions. The miniature UAVs can fly a distance of dozens of kilometers from the Gaza Strip, and can cover the greater Tel Aviv region, and even areas further north.²⁶ A senior IDF source said that if Hamas uses these UAVs as miniature suicide UAVs, the potential damage would be less than the damage from a rocket.²⁷

On November 16, 2012, during Operation Pillar of Defense, the Israel Air Force attacked and destroyed a warehouse storing Hamas's miniature UAVs. The UAVs were in the advanced stages of development, with precise attack capabilities and the ability to collect high quality intelligence.²⁸ On July 14, 2014, during Operation Protective Edge, a Hamas UAV penetrated into Israel and was intercepted by the air force. The IDF claimed that it was unclear whether the UAV was booby-trapped or sent for photography purposes.²⁹ Since Operation Protective Edge, Hamas has been trying to rebuild its array of miniature UAVs.³⁰ On June 25, 2015, a UAV from the Gaza Strip penetrated Israeli territory, but disintegrated near the border fence.³¹ On September 20, 2016, the Israel Air Force detection system spotted a Hamas UAV taking off from the Gaza Strip that flew along the Gaza Strip coastline for several minutes. The UAV was monitored by Israel as soon as it took off, until it was intercepted with the help of an F-16, although it never entered Israeli territory.³²

In addition to the miniature UAVs, Hamas is training its soldiers to use other airborne weapons. A Hamas soldier with the rank of squad commander told the Israel Security Agency in his interrogation that he had been selected in

2010 for a special force that was sent to Malaysia for training on paragliders in preparation for terrorist attacks penetrating Israel. Ten other soldiers from various battalions who had trained there for a week in flying paragliders were with him. In 2014, the soldier, together with the others who had been trained with him, were summoned for additional paraglider training, this time in the Gaza Strip.³³

On February 15, 2016, it was reported that Mohamed al-Zawari had been killed in Tunisia. Al-Zawari was an engineer and flight expert who was a member of Hamas and Hezbollah, and had helped both organizations improve their array of UAVs, and had even infiltrated the Gaza Strip through a tunnel in order to train Hamas terrorists in the use of UAVs against Israeli targets. Sources in Hamas accused Israel of the killing.³⁴

Rockets: On the eve of Operation Protective Edge, Hamas had approximately 11,000 rockets, mostly short range and a few long range (up to 160 kilometers). At the end of the fighting, as a result of massive firing at Israel (about 4,000 rockets) and attacks by Israel, Hamas was left with a third of that number. Hamas therefore assigned top priority to increasing its stock of rockets and mortar shells and improving its technical capabilities. In view of the lessons from Operation Protective Edge, and following difficulties in smuggling standard long range rockets from the Sinai Peninsula into the Gaza Strip, Hamas emphasized the procurement of high trajectory short range weapons.³⁵ About 18 months after Operation Protective Edge, Israel believes that Hamas has managed to refurbish its stock of rockets that it had before that conflict, although most of them are short range, while most locally produced rockets are less accurate than the standard rockets.³⁶

Smuggling production equipment: Since Operation Protective Edge, Hamas has devoted most of its resources to an extensive campaign to procure and smuggle goods, including dual purpose materials that are liable to be used in weapons manufacturing. These materials are brought into the Gaza Strip in cooperation with dealers from Judea and Samaria and elsewhere in Israeli territory. Most of the goods, including electronic and electrical equipment, communications equipment, and raw materials for industry are used to rebuild and improve the system of attack tunnels; produce weapons, with an emphasis on rockets; and create technological support systems for warfare.³⁷

Together with the procurement campaign, which has consumed many financial resources, Hamas is taking action, including through violent means,

to gain control over raw materials, among them cement, iron, and wood, that have been approved for entry into the Gaza Strip in order to support reconstruction of civilian infrastructure in the area. Few of these materials are sent to the population; the bulk is confiscated and sent directly to those engaged in rebuilding and expanding military infrastructure.³⁸ In 2016, the IDF and the Israel Security Agency thwarted 1,226 attempts at smuggling forbidden materials into the Gaza Strip, 165 percent more than in 2015. Items seized included drones, model airplanes, security cameras, communications equipment, military equipment, military uniforms, auto trailers and engines, iron and aluminum pipes, metal balls, diving equipment, and snapping ropes. It is believed that these were sent for Hamas's military wing and the terrorist organization's attempts at military buildup.³⁹

The Hamas military buildup, which necessarily comes at the expense of reconstructing civilian infrastructure in the Gaza Strip, is also reflected in the exploitation of international aid organizations operating in the Gaza Strip. For example, in August 2016 the Israel Security Agency exposed a senior figure in the World Vision international aid organization, who served for years as a senior agent of Hamas's military wing. This man covertly diverted \$7.2 million a year designated for Gaza's civilian population to the Hamas military wing.⁴⁰ Likewise, Hamas took control of 2,500 food packages with a value of \$100 per package sent to needy people in the Gaza Strip, and sent them to its members. Similar interceptions occurred with 3,000 cases of cleaning and personal care materials worth \$80 per package intended for Gaza Strip residents and diverted to members of Hamas's military wing. Families of Hamas members falsely listed their children as injured in order to get money that was designated for needy children.⁴¹

On February 12, 2017, Israel arrested Muhammad Murtaja, head of TIKA, the Turkish government's humanitarian aid organization, on suspicion of acting in the service of Hamas's military wing over the past decade. Murtaja transferred millions of shekels for Hamas military personnel in the course of the fighting during Operation Protective Edge and afterwards, in addition to food packages contributed by TIKA for the needy population in the Gaza Strip. At the end of Operation Protective Edge, TIKA financed a public event in which Hamas's military personnel were given grants and benefits.⁴²

Conclusion

The tension in Hamas between the political leadership and the military wing mainly concerns the organization's priorities in allocating resources and investing efforts. While the political leadership is pushing to speed up the reconstruction efforts in the Gaza Strip and rebuild Hamas's relations with Egypt and Saudi Arabia, the military leadership is setting its sights on the organization's military buildup, including the extension of cooperation with jihad groups operating in the Sinai Peninsula. At the same time, despite the differences between the two wings, they agree that a large scale military conflict with Israel is inconsistent with the organization's interest at the present time.

Hamas continues to rule in the Gaza Strip. Its authority is indisputable, and it is succeeding in controlling the pressure resulting from the distress of the population there, although it is sometimes challenged by the resistance organizations operating within the Gaza Strip. At the same time, it is possible that the population's distress and the provocative activity by recalcitrant factions against Israel will cause escalation that will drag Israel and Hamas into another conflict. Under the current conditions, Hamas does not want a conflict, but it is preparing for the possibility that one will take place with strenuous efforts to build up its military force. These efforts include renewing its system of offensive and defensive tunnels, improving its ability to manufacture arms, and establishing trained special forces.

In order to reduce the likelihood that the distress in the Gaza Strip will reinforce belligerent tendencies in Hamas's ranks, and perhaps also in order to embarrass the Palestinian Authority, undermine its status, and pave the way for a Hamas takeover in the West Bank, an effort should be made to rebuild civilian infrastructure in the Gaza Strip, under the assumption that a heightened reconstruction effort will constitute a restraining factor against any outbreak of violence. An effort should be made toward external parties in the reconstruction project, including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and the international community, although creative diplomacy will be required in order to assemble a broad coalition of this nature, in which the member countries have different, and sometimes contradictory, interests.

Notes

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