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“The March of Return” – Operative Achievement and Strategic Failure: A Test Case for Cognitive Warfare
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“The Great March of Return” is a series of Palestinian mass demonstrations held mainly on Fridays along the security fence that encloses the Gaza Strip, which began on “Land Day” and was to culminate on “Nakba Day.” The climax of these demonstrations occurred on May 14—the day that the US embassy was relocated from Tel-Aviv to Jerusalem—when more than 40,000 demonstrators marched to the border fence, some of whom tried to break through the fence. Israel presented its defensive deployment of IDF forces as an “iron wall” and successfully prevented infiltration into its territory. The confrontation on the day of the embassy’s inauguration in Jerusalem resulted in more than 60 Palestinian fatalities (about 50 of whom were Hamas members and supporters, according to Hamas official Salah al-Bardawil).

The element of cognitive warfare took center stage in the public announcements by both sides. Hamas called the demonstrations “a nonviolent grass-roots march” in an attempt to divert the confrontation with Israel from the military arena to a civilian one while highlighting the right to public protest. Israel in contrast presented the demonstrations as terrorist activities attempting to repudiate Israeli sovereignty while using women and children as “human shields.”

Israel’s cognitive efforts vis-à-vis the Palestinians face several challenges:

Public opinion tends to take the side of the perceived underdog: The Palestinians in the Gaza Strip are living under an Israeli and Egyptian blockade and in conditions of a steadily intensifying humanitarian crisis. Consequently, they are trying to leverage their hardships in order to regain a place on the global agenda. As the Facebook page of the “Great March of Return” stated in advance of the campaign: “The march of thousands of families to the border will shame the occupation and will draw media sympathy for the plight of our people.” In contrast, Israel is perceived as having the upper hand and choosing to use force against civilians.

The mobilization of Gazan residents, and placing of women and children at the front opposite IDF soldiers, emphasizes the asymmetry, since any use of force will be perceived in advance as excessive. This is also how a narrative of Palestinian heroism is created. Hamas diverted the confrontation from the military dimension—in which the power ratios are clearly tipped in favor of the Israeli side—to the civilian and cognitive dimensions. As Ahmed Abu Ratima, one of the original organizers of the campaign (who is not a member of Hamas), said, “The Palestinians have gained more confidence in the

soft power that they can wield . . . these nonviolent protests will largely neutralize the vast arsenal available to the occupation state . . . the option of [the use of] force can be useful when confronting 5,000 protestors, but it loses much of its power when facing 200,000 protestors . . . the return marches have a moral transparency that increases their chances of success. They call for the return of the refugees to their homes in a nonviolent manner.”

One picture is worth a thousand word: One good picture is enough to achieve the cognitive effect. The events produced simultaneously a juxtaposition of pictures on tv screens and social networks worldwide: on one side, the picture of the crowd in the Gaza Strip being fired upon by IDF soldiers; on the other side, the inauguration of the American Embassy in Jerusalem, attended by dignitaries from Israel and the United States.

Terrorist activities or legitimate civilian protest: Israel failed in its efforts to delegitimize the protest and brand it as organized terrorist activities—a failure that was predictable since the organizers of the march stated at the outset that their intention was to hold a nonviolent march. However, Hamas’s takeover of the campaign led to a spillover into violence, which resulted in an Israeli response and the massive number of injuries. Israel could have exploited this development by sending a message to the Palestinian population about Hamas’s ultimate responsibility for the injuries. Instead, Israel merely attempted to curb the size of the demonstrations through deterrent messages urging the residents of Gaza to step away from the fence. Eventually, the demonstrations diminished in size, mainly due to a decision by Hamas, apparently the result of Egyptian pressure (which was accompanied by the opening of the Rafah border crossing for a time), pressure from Qatar, and the reluctance of Gazan young people to participate in the demonstrations due to their futility and the massive number of injuries.

The emerging situation report from the perspective of the international community: Up until the events of May 14, when more than 60 Palestinians were killed during clashes along the border fence, the international pressure on Israel had been relatively moderate, both due to the relatively low number of injuries during most of the demonstrations and mainly because the spotlight was on other developments in the international arena, primarily the US withdrawal from the nuclear agreement with Iran, the escalation between Iran and Israel in Syria, and the preparations for a possible US-North Korea summit. On the day that the American Embassy was relocated to Jerusalem, however, the demonstrations reached their peak (to date). The deaths of dozens of Palestinians increased the international pressure on Israel and included harsh diplomatic measures, such as the recalls of the ambassadors of Turkey and South Africa, scathing criticism in the global media, condemnations in the social networks and intensifying condemnation of Israel in international forums, which culminated in the UN Civil Rights Council’s approving the formation of an international commission of inquiry to investigate the events.

Recommendations

The Israeli government and security establishment succeeded in convincing the Israeli public that the IDF had carried out defensive orders and did so legitimately. This did not require much effort, since most of the Israeli public already supports the security forces and their preventing the demonstrations along Israel’s southern border and believes that Hamas, as a terrorist organization, is responsible for the violence that accompanied the riots along the border fence. The statement by a Hamas official that the vast majority of the casualties were members of its organization was perceived as proof that it was not an innocent civilian protest driven solely by frustration and hardship. Unfortunately, Israel failed to deliver a message along these lines to the Palestinian public and to the international community, especially when the backdrop to the protest is the prolonged blockade and the dire humanitarian situation. The photos of Israeli snipers opposite demonstrators and incendiary kites strengthened the propaganda that the Palestinians sought to disseminate.

As for the Palestinian public, Israel’s cognitive efforts exerted only during times of crisis have no value if—between the rounds of confrontation—they do not inculcate the perception that Hamas contributes to the prolonged crisis in the Gaza Strip. An ongoing multidisciplinary effort, including humanitarian, economic, civil, diplomatic, and public relations components, is needed in order to influence the basic mindset of the population in the Gaza Strip in the desired direction and especially to encourage the Gazans to be open to Israeli communications (whether covert or overt) in the event of a future flare-up. The social networks constitute a main arena for the cognitive campaign. The duration, continuity, and scope of this campaign are the most significant factors in shaping perceptions. A constant stream of messages that will regularly resonate in the social media is needed in order to widen existing rifts between Hamas and the residents of the Gaza Strip and to accentuate the criticisms being voiced against Hamas in relation to various issues, including its tunnel-digging project and its cost in terms of the deteriorating humanitarian situation in Gaza. For those who already decry Hamas’s conduct, this resonance of subversive messages might boost their self-confidence enough to publicly express their opinion.

Vis-à-vis the international community, a campaign should be launched in the social networks to strengthen narratives that support Israeli interests, by disseminating pro-Israeli messages and presenting relevant facts and interpretations. These efforts should be made before and during events. Israel should recruit a massive number of people to aid in this campaign and to delegitimize the stream of posts in the social networks that vilify the State of Israel and its activities. Israel should routinely strengthen organizations, such as ACT.il (a voluntary online community of pro-Israeli activists worldwide) to leverage their power to positively influence international public opinion toward the State of Israel via social media platforms. The Palestinians are working intensively in the social networks and are publishing interviews, photos and videos, some of which are fabricated.

On the other hand, the majority of Israel’s media response to the events along the border fence is limited to official announcements by the IDF spokesman in the traditional media, and for the most part, is lagging significantly behind Hamas.

In addition, Israel must also minimize the use of lethal force against the Palestinians. Within this context, the massive number of injuries suffered by Palestinian demonstrators might achieve a deterrent effect but, at the same time, it might likewise merely incite more violence. As for the international community, it will view Israel in a negative light because of the number of people injured, regardless of whether they are civilians or members of Hamas.

The campaign between Israel and Hamas and, essentially, between Israel and the Gaza Strip, as manifested in recent months by the “Great March of Return,” is a test of Israel’s cognitive strategy. Since the issue is a sequence of developing events and a competition between the two rivals in learning and evolving, Israel must develop its cognitive strategy in relation to three target audiences—the Palestinians, the international community, and Israelis—and must improve the overt and covert coordination between the military and civilian parties involved in the campaign.