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On Deterrence, Equations, Arrangements, and Strategy

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After last weekend, both Israel and Hamas claimed success in implementing the respective equations they have tried to impose, but neither party is convincing. Hamas's claims do not match the facts: the organization paid a heavy price resulting from IDF activity in the Strip, and did not respond with "attack for attack." At the same time, it is still too early to judge whether Israel has managed to stop the arson terror and whether it has renewed its deterrence against Hamas. It appears that Hamas still estimates that Israel is unwilling to engage in full-scale hostilities, and this could encourage the organization to continue its attempts to attack. However, even Hamas realizes that there is a limit to Israel's restraint. Therefore, Israel must adopt a proactive strategy designed to change the ongoing "asymmetric strategic tie" with Hamas. The range of options should include political moves and military moves, with a smart integration of both. If the moves toward an arrangement are unsuccessful and Hamas clings to its position and continues to challenge Israel militarily, there will be no choice but to prepare for a broad military operation in Gaza. The minimum objective will be to cause very serious damage to Hamas, particularly its military wing, and reestablish long term effective deterrence to facilitate the enforcement of a more stable arrangement (in the guise of a "limited hudna").

Any analysis of recent developments in Gaza should begin by taking a step back from the current hostilities, and instead look at the basic assumptions of each of the parties involved and their strategies for achieving their respective primary national objectives.

In terms of national security, the State of Israel has never been stronger. It enjoys military superiority in the Middle East, with high quality intelligence, a superb air force, advanced defense systems against rockets and missiles, and a substantial technological edge. Its contacts with the Arab world, be they open or behind the scenes, are growing around shared interests. Its support from the White House is unprecedented, and at the same time, there is also a good working relationship between Jerusalem and Moscow.

In contrast, Hamas moves from failure to failure. Its rule of the Gaza Strip has led to a severe economic and humanitarian crisis. In the political arena, it has encountered hostility from the Arab world, which sees it as a proxy of the Muslim Brotherhood and

Iran. In the military arena, the organization faces significant obstacles, which prevent it from becoming a serious threat to Israel, as its rockets can be neutralized by the Iron Dome system and the tunnels under the border fence are discovered and destroyed by the IDF. It has had difficulty obtaining weapons from outside Gaza, thanks to effective preventive activity by Egypt in Sinai. Even in its own Palestinian arena, the conflict with Fatah is far from resolved, despite numerous attempts to promote a settlement.

Nevertheless, and notwithstanding the unequivocal lack of symmetry in the balance of power, Hamas has managed to challenge Israel and attempt once again to achieve an “asymmetric strategic tie.” Hamas has been able to erode the Israeli deterrence that was established since Operation Protective Edge in the summer of 2014, to breach the calm that prevailed in the south, and try to define new “equations” and rules of engagement. To be sure, Hamas did not plan the March of Return or the kites and balloons-based arson attacks, but it found in them attractive tactics and turned them into two central operational efforts.

Neither side wants war; Israel is satisfied for “quiet in return for quiet” and the renewal of deterrence. For its part, Hamas is interested above all in breaching the “blockade,” in order to revive the Gaza economy, improve living conditions, and enable it to enhance its military power. These achievements would help it prove that its path of “resistance” was and remains the correct and most efficient solution for the Palestinians in their struggle against Israel.

Israel, which has resolutely thwarted Hamas intentions to infiltrate into Israel and Israeli communities and attack or kidnap citizens and soldiers, is hard pressed to find an operational response to the terror kites and balloons, which infringe on its sovereignty and cause environmental and economic damage and harm to its national mood. The fact that although the fires have caused significant damage they have not endangered lives has led to a public debate in Israel about the proper response. This debate - legitimate in a democracy - and the leaks from cabinet meetings and the cautious use of fire by IDF forces has shown Hamas that Israel is not eager to engage in a new round of fighting on the Gaza front. Paradoxically, Israel’s willingness to embark on a broad military operation against Hamas in Gaza acts as a stabilizing, restraining factor, while its unwillingness to take action could actually encourage fighting.

Hamas fully understands Israel’s reluctance to engage in a further all-out round of fighting, and has tried to impose two new equations – “attack for attack” and “blood for blood.” Its success in establishing the first equation by firing mortars and rockets at the Gaza perimeter zone, after the IDF frustrated its attempts to breach the border fence, encouraged it to try and implement the “blood for blood” equation and attack Israelis

after numerous Palestinians were killed in the border hostilities. On Friday, July 19, 2018, an IDF soldier was shot by a Palestinian sniper and Hamas took responsibility, even though there is no certainty that the action was initiated or approved by its leadership (the presence at the border of Ismail Haniyeh, head of the Hamas Political Bureau, and the fact that members of the military arm at the observation post were not evacuated before the shooting is evidence of the possibility that the action took place without the leadership's knowledge or approval).

Israel is also trying to establish its own equation: arson attacks, which harm the civilian population even if they do not cause loss of life, will be met with the denial of entry of goods, fuel, and building materials to Gaza. Attacks on IDF soldiers or mortar fire on Israeli communities along Gaza's perimeter will be met with massive attacks on Hamas facilities, and the organization will pay a heavy price, at this stage in material assets rather than lives.

After last weekend, both sides vehemently claimed success in establishing their own equations, but neither is convincing. Hamas's claims do not match the facts: the organization paid a heavy price due to IDF activity in the Strip, and did not respond with "attack for attack," and even the killing of three members of its military arm as a result of the IDF response to the killing of the soldier by sniper fire has not (yet) been avenged.

It is still too early to judge whether Israel has managed to stop the arson terror and whether it has renewed its deterrence against Hamas. It appears that Hamas still estimates that Israel is unwilling to engage in full-scale hostilities, and this could encourage the organization to continue its attempts to attack Israel. However, even Hamas realizes that there is a limit to Israel's restraint, and if it crosses a certain red line, Israel will be forced into a broad response.

This has created the same "asymmetric strategic tie" that was defined at the end of Operation Protective Edge. In the hard balance of power and kinetic warfare, Israel has undoubtedly scored impressive achievements: its borders were not breached and its citizens were not harmed. Hamas weapons factories, training camps, and storage facilities were wiped out by the air force. Yet Hamas still has a sense of achievement. It has once again put the humanitarian and political aspects of the Gaza issue on the international agenda; damaged Israel's image; undermined the sense of security among the Israeli population in the communities near the Gaza border; and challenged Israeli sovereignty in the Gaza environs.

In order to break this ongoing tie, Israel must adopt a proactive rather than a reactive strategy. It must take an approach designed to change the reality and not sanctify the

status quo. The range of options should include political moves and military moves, with the emphasis on a smart integration of both.

The formula proposed by the Israeli government after Protective Edge, "reconstruction in return for demilitarization," was rejected consistently by Hamas. The organization clung to its refusal in principle to lay down its arms in exchange for any progress toward reconstruction of the Gaza Strip, be it rescinding the embargo or achieving reconciliation with Fatah and the Palestinian Authority. Efforts by Egypt and international bodies to persuade Hamas to relax its terms of agreement have so far been unsuccessful. The idea of a hudna – a long term cease fire – is not realistic. The parameters set by Hamas as a condition for a "long term hudna" are more problematic for Israel than the conditions that have repeatedly led to the failure of negotiations between Israel and the PA. A recent Washington Post article reported that even the team appointed by President Trump to examine the feasibility of the "minor deal" in the Gaza Strip has recognized that it is impossible to promote reconstruction in Gaza due to Hamas's refusal to renounce its identity as a terror organization and lay down its arms.

However, efforts can and must be made to promote more modest understandings, namely, a "limited hudna," including parameters that both Israel and Hamas can live with. A fundamental condition for such an arrangement is a total halt of terror from Gaza and the return of Israeli civilians and bodies of the fallen soldiers held by Hamas. Immediately thereafter it will be possible to promote a plan to improve humanitarian conditions in the Strip, and build infrastructure for electricity, water, sewage, and transport. Border crossings will be opened based on strict security criteria and control; Hamas will not be asked to dismantle its military arm, but must undertake to freeze it and not to seek further buildup (based on the reality that Israel has neutralized Hamas's two central military capabilities – the rockets and the tunnels).

An Israeli government that wishes to restart the political process will also promote the return of the Palestinian Authority to Gaza, but on Mahmoud Abbas's terms: "one law, one gun," rather than the "Hezbollah model" that likely appeals to Hamas. Based on its own interest, Egypt is a full partner in any intra-Palestinian reconciliation that will return the PA to Gaza.

If the steps toward such an arrangement are unsuccessful and Hamas clings to its position and continues to challenge Israel militarily, there will be no choice but to prepare for a broad military operation in Gaza. The minimum objective will be to cause very serious damage to Hamas, particularly its military wing, and reestablish long term effective deterrence to facilitate the enforcement of a more stable arrangement ("limited hudna") with parameters that address the humanitarian crisis in Gaza while ensuring quiet and

security on the Israeli side of the border. Meanwhile, effective mechanisms must be established to ensure that Hamas is neither building new military capabilities nor scoring points that will strengthen it in the Palestinian political arena.