Hamas's Efforts toward a Cognitive Victory
in the Latest Round in Gaza

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In the latest confrontation between Israel and Hamas, Israel's policy was to offer sparse explanations to the public regarding the limited response to the Hamas attacks; this in turn allowed Hamas's own interpretation of the events to dominate. As the Israeli public was not informed of the considerations behind the government's restrained response, the sense of internal resilience was undermined. While Hamas won points in the cognitive battle, the Israeli public was embarrassed and disappointed; the political establishment was caught up in infighting that nearly led to the downfall of the government. The chain of events in the latest round of confrontation illustrates the need to marshal the civilian population in Israel in the cognitive battle. Similarly, it is appropriate for Israel – both officially and unofficially – to encourage Israeli social media activity in the cognitive campaign. The element responsible for managing the Israeli cognitive campaign should centralize operations and deliver a specific, tailored response to incidents, combining the cognitive warfare capabilities of the security establishment, the Foreign Ministry, and the civilian population.

Designing a picture of a comfortable reality for one side of a conflict is the definition of a successful cognitive campaign. One example of this is the cognitive campaign waged by Hamas in the wake of the confrontation with Israel in the Gaza Strip on November 12-13, 2018. The events themselves ended with the deaths of seven Hamas members, including a battalion commander, while the Israeli forces in Khan Younis, deep in the Strip, were able to escape, albeit at the cost of their commander's life. Hamas's presentation of the exposure of the Israeli forces, as well as the massive rocket fire at communities in the Gaza envelope and at cities in the south, and the launch of a Kornet missile at a military bus following the exposure, facilitated the creation of the victorious image the organization's leaders sought to lend to the short campaign. In addition, Hamas declared that it succeeded in imposing new rules of the game on Israel, which was successfully deterred and therefore did not escalate the confrontation in response to the barrages of rockets.

Echoing Hamas claims, a sense of dissatisfaction with the results of the confrontation prevailed in the Israeli public and the political establishment. And indeed, it seems that

Hamas had the foresight to create a favorable image of reality through rapid response to the infiltration of Israeli forces, as well as a more effective cognitive warfare campaign than was waged by Israel. Hamas was able to exploit the frustrations in Israel arising from the clashes over the past several months around the separation barrier between Gaza and the nearby Israeli communities. Hamas's cognitive campaign also focused on the political debate in Israel about the steps that should be taken to bring security to the region.

However, the limited results of the Hamas operations did not force Israel into a wide-ranging military response, and therefore it should not be inferred that Israel was deterred by the organization's threats or its capabilities; instead it opted to allow a situation that would test the feasibility of reaching an arrangement with Hamas through diplomatic means. In part, Israel chose to avoid an escalation on the southern border just as it was starting an operation to thwart Hezbollah's tunnels in the northern theater. This undercuts Hamas's claim that it drafted new rules of the game, although it does not entirely negate the organization's claim that it achieved a cognitive victory.

This essay outlines how Hamas succeeded in convincing the Gaza population and even some in the Israeli public that this round ended in a Hamas victory, and uses that analysis toward improvements in Israel's cognitive warfare tools in the rounds to come.

Hamas's Victory Claim
Hamas spokesmen presented the round of confrontation and its outcome as a victory against Israel. According to the head of the Political Bureau, Ismail Haniyeh, Hamas succeeded in imposing "a new equation" on Israel, which it called "blood for blood" – implying that Israel is deterred in the face of a substantial response to its operations. Senior Hamas officials related this achievement to the strengths of their response as proof of the capabilities of the "resistance forces" to launch a barrage of some 500 rockets and mortars to the Gaza envelope, Sderot, Netivot, and Ashkelon, and to disrupt the daily life of Israel's southern population. In fact, casualties were limited: a Palestinian working in Israel was killed and Israeli injuries were relatively few. Hamas also boasted about its launch of a Kornet missile at a military bus that had entered firing range against IDF orders – an attack that led to an Israeli soldier being severely injured (who later recovered). Hamas footage of the assault went viral on social media, and backed Hamas claims that it was capable of harming IDF soldiers stationed on the border of the Strip at any moment.

At the victory rally staged by Hamas on November 16 in the presence of its leadership, Yahya Sinwar, leader of the organization in Gaza, pulled out a pistol left behind by the Israeli forces operating in Khan Younis as a symbol of the victory. Sinwar even quoted

Mohammed Deif, leader of the Hamas military wing, who promised that he had rockets that would reach Tel Aviv. Moreover, Hamas exploited the political infighting in Israel, specifically, the resignation of Defense Minister Liberman after the end of the round, to support its claims of victory. Sinwar boasted that Gaza was the cause of Liberman leaving the Defense Ministry in defeat. At the same time, Hamas failed to mention its failure to cause deaths on a wide scale and concealed the blows it sustained during the Israeli military response.

Hamas was an object of derision among its opponents, who pointed out that the organization had failed to prevent Israeli forces from infiltrating and operating freely for weeks deep within Gaza for an intelligence operation. That said, while Hamas failed to capture the IDF soldiers on the undercover mission, the fact of the exposure – a tactical victory – was presented as an achievement. Even the IDF Spokesperson's statement on the Iron Dome interception of many of the launched rockets (some 100 that had the risk of causing harm out of around 500 that were launched) did not prevent Hamas from presenting the launches as a cognitive victory. Likewise, Sinwar referred to the capabilities of the Iron Dome and Hamas's attempts to neutralize it: "Many rockets were launched at the Gaza envelope, up to the point that the Iron Dome system stopped working."

The frustration in Israel mainly related to the systematic attacks from the Gaza Strip on towns in the Gaza envelope using incendiary balloons and arson in the fields. These attacks tried the patience of the local population; some reacted to the upsurge in rocket fire by blocking roads and starting fires on the Israeli side of the border. These developments facilitated Hamas's description of the Israeli response to its operations as a sign of helplessness. A video of the attack on the bus may have documented the prevention of a tragedy, but it also demonstrated the organization's cognitive capabilities. This sufficed to expose the soft underbelly of Israeli society (concerned about the soldiers – "all of our children"). And yet unlike in previous rounds of confrontation between Israel and Hamas, Hamas did not give the battle a "hashtag" (a way of naming and categorizing topics on social media), perhaps because it was interested in a speedy end.

An additional element is the mobilization of society – on both sides – to convey or stymie messages. Hamas attempted to spread the personal information of the soldiers participating in the Khan Younis incursion on Palestinian social networks. It also sought the help of Israeli Arabs in identifying them, based on the curiosity of internet users and the virality of information transmitted on social media. On the other hand, this incident saw countermeasures from Israeli users, some from the establishment (censorship) and some from civil society. These users attempted to engage Israeli society in the

campaign's aftermath, intending to prevent the transmission or acquisition of additional details by Hamas. This combined Israeli effort led to positive results.

Principles for Israel in Future Campaigns
In the latest confrontation between Israel and Hamas, Israel opted for a policy of sparse explanations to the public regarding its limited response to the Hamas attacks; this in turn allowed Hamas's own interpretation of the events to dominate. As the Israeli public was not informed of the considerations behind the government's restrained response, the sense of internal resilience was undermined. While Hamas won points in the cognitive battle, the Israeli public was embarrassed and disappointed. The political establishment was caught up in infighting that nearly led to the downfall of the government. In the background was the gap in expectations between promises of a decisive response to terrorism from Gaza and the complexity of the reality. In this situation, Israel's ability to win clear and decisive victories in the cognitive battle is limited from the outset, and thus Hamas's dominance in the cognitive campaign stood out. It therefore follows that there is a price to be paid for a policy of ambiguity vis-à-vis the public, which perhaps was unnecessary: the public would have accepted a measured clarification regarding the relatively restrained measures taken by the government and security establishment.

An additional relevant issue is the responsibility for explaining policies. The IDF Spokesperson declared, "Hamas is leading to the destruction of Gaza." Several hours later, Air Force planes were bombing the Strip. In contrast, the government maintained its silence, and in the days following the round, ministers occasionally participated in radio broadcasts discussing the events. Beyond that, details about the incident in Khan Younis popped up sporadically on the radio.

The round of confrontations was preceded by an operation that was botched, and details about the incident continue to leak onto social media in Gaza, and from there into Israel as well. The abandonment of the cognitive theater to Hamas leaders has allowed them to present the battle as a victory, even though it could also be presented as a loss for the organization, as it did not prevent the Israeli infiltration itself.

An additional vector of operations that Israel can use to undermine Hamas's victory picture is the exploitation of weak points in Gazan systems and aggravation of existing rifts. This can be implemented, for example, through comments opposing Hamas in Gaza, which highlighted Hamas's failure to prevent Israel from acting within Gaza.

The chain of events in the latest round of confrontation illustrates the need to marshal the civilian population in Israel in the cognitive battle. Similarly, it is appropriate for Israel – both officially and unofficially – to encourage Israeli social media activity in the

cognitive campaign. The element responsible for managing the Israeli cognitive campaign should centralize operations and deliver a specific, tailored response to incidents, combining the cognitive warfare capabilities of the security establishment, the Foreign Ministry, and the civilian population.