

INSS Insight No. 1145, March 8, 2019

Hamas's "New Campaign" in Gaza, One Year Later

Michael Milstein

The current campaign along the Gaza border, which began nearly one year ago, differs fundamentally from other struggles Israel has faced in this arena over the last decades, and consequently can be considered a "new campaign." The struggle waged since March 2018 initially started with independent popular initiatives that were appropriated early on by Hamas, fine-tuned, and adapted to the organization's needs and objectives, but a year into the campaign, Hamas cannot claim a stellar performance. The Gaza Strip is the most volatile of the arenas Israel currently confronts. While neither side has any interest in escalation before the next Israeli parliamentary elections, the situation could deteriorate – as it has in the past – due to ongoing friction and miscalculation. Hamas currently is dissatisfied with the scope of its understandings with Israel and their rate of implementation, and is therefore eager to continue the new campaign model to earn additional civilian achievements. This current reality thus confronts Israel with a complex dilemma, throwing into stark relief polar opposite alternatives: to ease civilian restrictions further, which plays into Hamas's hands and acknowledges its rule (without any progress on the issue of Israel's MIAs and POWs), or to raise the probability of a new broad military offensive.

The current campaign along the Gaza border, which began nearly one year ago, differs fundamentally from other struggles Israel has faced in this arena over the last decades. Consequently, it can be considered a "new campaign." This campaign began with the Marches of Return, a popular source of friction of unprecedented scope and intensity in the Gaza Strip. The new campaign was subsequently manifested in the incendiary kites and balloons dispatched to Israel and in localized military clashes near the border, and climaxed in rounds of escalation reminiscent of the period preceding Operation Protective Edge (summer 2014).

Until the onset of the new campaign, Israel concentrated on military threats emanating from the Gaza Strip, primarily rocket fire, tunnels, and border friction (sniper attacks, IEDs, grenades, and anti-tank fire). The model of the popular struggle – typical of the West Bank, entailing contact between the Israeli army and a fairly large part of the population – was copied to the Gaza sector, with adjustments to the region's particular conditions. The ongoing confrontation has required Israel to be vigilant at all times, allocate large

resources, and divert attention from the major strategic challenges the nation faces, first and foremost the northern front.

The new campaign was not a preconceived plan of action, but rather the result of a trial and error approach Hamas adopted over the last year. The struggle waged since March 2018 initially started with independent popular initiatives that were appropriated early on by Hamas, fine-tuned, and adapted to the organization's needs and objectives. For Hamas, the struggle was meant to extricate it from its intricate troubles without exposing it to the risk of a broad military campaign along the lines of Operation Protective Edge with its inevitable massive cost in blood and treasure. As such, this *modus operandi*, in a term borrowed from an approach the IDF has developed in recent years, is like a "campaign between campaigns."

On the eve of the new campaign, Hamas faced a multitude of crises. The organization's main concern was the plight of the Gaza Strip population and ways to alleviate hardship. Thus, while the purpose of the new campaign was to pressure Israel toward further concessions for the civilian population, the conflict was also intended to divert local attention from the internal problems and channel the popular frustration toward Israel. The "popular" nature of most of the incidents – especially the Marches of Return, but the kite and balloon bombs as well – was supposed to help Hamas earn greater legitimacy, both domestically and internationally, and thereby prevent Israel from applying its superior military capabilities in response to the new challenges on the southern border.

A year into the campaign, Hamas cannot claim a stellar performance. On the one hand, Israel was forced to deal with events on the Gaza border, and the organization succeeded in positioning the issue at the heart of the Israeli discourse, at times to the chagrin of Israel's political and military echelons (Hamas has taken credit for the "achievement" of forcing the resignation of Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman and Israel's early elections). Furthermore, Hamas attained some civil successes, leading to a certain easing of civilian conditions in the Gaza Strip over the last few months; the most important was securing the Qatar-financed payments for civil servant salaries and the Gaza Strip's electricity bill (which led to the doubling of the electric supply from four to eight or more hours a day).

On the other hand, the eased conditions are still overshadowed by the profound basic problems that Hamas is unable to resolve, above all, unemployment (especially among the young), the devastated civil infrastructures, and the restrictions on entering and leaving Gaza. As Hamas is well aware, unresolved, these contribute to a highly volatile domestic situation. Moreover, the concessions achieved are seen as disproportionate to the heavy human toll exacted by the campaign, a commonplace grievance in the Gaza Strip's public discourse, which from time to time is even expressed publicly.

The new campaign invites several insights on Hamas's current profile and basic trends in the Palestinian system:

- a. The split-in-practice between the two parts of the Palestinian system. Despite the deaths of more than 250 Palestinians in border incidents over the past year, the West Bank remains relatively calm. At least for now, it seems that West Bank Palestinians are averse to promoting public moves (including any that would express solidarity with their Gaza brethren), preferring instead to continue improving their quality of life. This is highly frustrating to Hamas, which tries consistently – with no success – to fan the flames in the West Bank by engaging in attacks and encouraging a popular struggle.
- b. Honing Hamas's self-perception as a sovereign, with its major if not key goal of preserving governance and caring for the population without erasing the organization's original character, strategic objectives, and especially the importance it attributes to its military nature. As was the case in Operation Protective Edge, the civilian consideration lies at the core of the new battle and again demonstrates Gaza's Gordian knot between the civilian and the military, a connection insufficiently appreciated in Israel before Operation Protective Edge.
- c. Hamas persists in its attempt to decode Israel's way of thinking, and it is clear that the organization's leadership understands the deep reservations that Israel's government, army, and public harbor regarding incremental escalation that could result in the occupation of Gaza. Therefore, Hamas is promoting a campaign model that allows it to express itself as a resistance organization and prove that although it is the party in power and despite its concerns regarding a large scale battle, it is not completely deterred from provocative moves against Israel.
- d. A return to the "era of rounds." The phenomenon is linked with the risk of sliding into a widespread campaign, as in Operation Protective Edge – without either side necessarily wanting or planning this outcome. The combination of growing audacity on the part of armed factions in the Gaza Strip and Hamas's reluctance to restrain them forcibly is a recipe for deterioration: localized clashes are liable to develop into exchanges of blows with Israel and then expand into a broad confrontation.
- e. Highlighting the problem of the younger generation of Palestinians in general and in the Gaza Strip in particular. Young Gazans are the central moving force behind the campaign between campaigns and they outweigh any other segment, both as protestors and as casualties. Hamas is aware of the profound frustration among the masses of young people with no future who feel they have nothing to lose, and it therefore tries to channel their anger into action against Israel. A future outbreak of rage at Hamas might force the organization to engage in limited military action against Israel to divert the public's attention from Gaza's internal problems.

The Gaza Strip is the most volatile of the arenas Israel currently confronts. While neither side has any interest in escalation before the next Israeli parliamentary elections, the situation could deteriorate – as it has in the past – due to ongoing friction and miscalculation. Hamas currently is dissatisfied with the scope of its understandings with Israel and their rate of implementation, and is therefore eager to continue the new campaign model to earn additional civilian achievements. Thus far it appears that the release of the four members of Hamas's military wing detained in Egyptian since 2015 - which seemed like an Egyptian attempt to ensure Hamas would not cause escalation - has not translated into less friction in the border zone. On the contrary, the continuation of aerial incendiary devices in recent days and nightly "harassment" designed to damage the quality of life in Israeli towns near the Gaza Strip (especially explosions set off near the border) have resulted in Israeli attacks and might provide a possible background for uncontrolled deterioration in the near future. This is all against the backdrop of the late winter and spring season with its Palestinian national commemorations (from Land Day at the end of March to Naksa Day on June 5), when a surge in popular protests with mass participation should be fairly easy to organize.

The security situation in the Gaza Strip will continue to be tied inextricably to the civilian situation there. More civilian moves on Israel's part, even if limited in scope – such as easing restrictions on movement, jumpstarting infrastructure projects (especially for water and electricity), and attracting foreign aid – could help ease the tensions. Such moves have the power to temper public anger and increase Hamas's motivation to enforce its rule. This is a complex decision, throwing into stark relief the polar opposite alternatives plaguing Israel: to promote the easing of civilian restrictions, which plays into Hamas's hands and acknowledges its rule (without any progress on the issue of Israel's MIAs and POWs), or to raise the probability of a new broad military offensive whose end is impossible to predict.

** Col. (ret.) Michael Milstein, formerly advisor on Palestinian affairs to the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories and senior officer in IDF intelligence., is head of the Palestinian Studies Forum at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies.*