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Israel's Exhausted Strategy of Deterrence vis-à-vis Hamas

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The two Fajr/M-75 rockets fired at Tel Aviv on the evening of March 14, 2019 caught the Israeli security establishment – as well as the political echelon – by complete surprise. Whether the rocket fire was a mistake, as declared by Hamas and the IDF, or intentional, both the rockets and the Israeli response are further evidence that Hamas continues its policy of defiance while controlling escalation and dictating the rules of the game with Israel. This means that Israel's policy of deterrence with regard to Hamas and the other organizations active in the Strip has been eroded. Israel's current policy, which seeks to contain escalation by easing the closure and strengthening deterrence, fails to deal with the area's fundamental problems. The Gaza Strip is experiencing a longstanding humanitarian crisis with no hope of reconstruction; it is ruled by Hamas, a radical element waging terrorist activity against Israel; and the chances that the PA will regain control of Gaza are rapidly diminishing. To resolve these problems, Israel may take one of two radical approaches. One approach is to grant official recognition to the Hamas regime in the Gaza Strip and sever the area's connection with the West Bank. The second option is a military confrontation to dismantle the military wing of Hamas and the other terrorist organizations in the Gaza Strip. To pursue either option, Israel must display the will and preparedness for a wide scale military confrontation against Hamas's military capabilities that will change the rules of the game that have become rooted over recent years. The Israeli government is urged to abandon its concept of deterrence against Hamas because its validity has eroded, and instead strive to change its Gaza Strip policy in an effort to transform the area from the ground up.

The two Fajr/M-75 rockets fired at Tel Aviv on the evening of March 14, 2019 caught the Israeli security establishment – as well as the political echelon – by complete surprise. Although escalation with Hamas before the forthcoming Knesset elections on April 9 is considered a distinct possibility (also because it has been a year since the March of Return events began, as well as the ensuing incidents on the Israel-Gaza Strip border), the rockets were fired in the middle of Egyptian efforts to mediate between Hamas and Israel over implementing the next stage of understandings: security quiet on the Israel front in exchange for further easing of restrictions on the import and export of goods to and from the Gaza Strip, and progress on infrastructure projects to improve the quality of life there.

Hence, it is unclear who decided to gamble by launching strategic weapons against the greater Tel Aviv area, and why now.

All armed entities in the Gaza Strip immediately denied responsibility. Only two organizations – Hamas and Islamic Jihad – have the capability to launch 75-km. range rockets (i.e., Fajr or M-75). Islamic Jihad generally operates independently, though at times is directed by the Iranian Quds Force. However, its denial is credible, because responsibility for the rocket fire would serve the belligerent image it likes to project. Hamas, too, was circumspect. Initially, it denied launching the rockets, but after the IDF revealed that this was in fact a Hamas incident, the official version changed: now, they said, the launch was the result of a command or technical mishap (Yahya Sinwar, the Hamas leader in the Gaza Strip, relayed a message to the Egyptian delegation that the rockets were launched by mistake while being serviced). The Hamas leadership understands that Israel would like to avoid escalation, at least until the election, and is therefore prepared to raise the threshold of risk. Still, the launch of rockets aimed at Tel Aviv is a dangerous deviation from the rules of the game tacitly formulated by the sides at this time.

Two explanations for what lay behind the launch come to mind. According to the first explanation, the launch was in fact unintentional, occurring because of an error in Hamas's chain of command, or less likely, a rocket maintenance failure. The launch occurred while Hamas leaders were in talks with the Egyptian delegation about attaining greater calm, and challenged the trend toward greater quiet that had marked the previous week (as a result of Egyptian pressure, the nightly protests along the fence were suspended, and fewer incendiary balloons were sent across the border). Israel agreed to cooperate with the effort to attain a long term period of quiet, beyond the election period; the government's lack of desire to go to war in Gaza is entirely clear. Israel's goal vies with Hamas's strategic rationale, which says that it is best to strive for Gaza's stability, reconstruction, and greater economic activity, while simultaneously pursuing an operational strategy of controlled escalation and risk-taking vis-à-vis Israel. This seeming duality perhaps reflects tension within the organization's ranks, specifically between the political leadership, which seeks an arrangement, and the military branch, which believes that Hamas will attain its goals only through force.

According to the second explanation, and contrary to the announcements by Hamas and the IDF, the launch was intentional. It is hard to believe that a strategic rocket launch occurred without the organization's leaders knowing and without their oversight, if not initiative. Hamas is suspected of having deployed launchers ready to fire at a moment's notice, and the organization is known for its use of fire as a tool in managing Egypt-mediated negotiations with Israel. A similar incident occurred in October 2018 when

Hamas operatives fired two rockets, one at Beer Sheva and the other at central Israel, just before the end of Sinwar's ultimatum on lifting the Gaza Strip blockade. Another catalyst for the launch could be the widespread demonstrations by refugee camp inhabitants against the cost of living and the rampant poverty – manifestations of fury that erupted without warning and were violently suppressed by Hamas. It may be that Hamas chose to divert the public's attention toward Israel.

While the IDF and defense establishment assessed that the launch at greater Tel Aviv was a mistake (did they rely on Sinwar's report to Egypt?), the military response made it clear that Israel sees Hamas as responsible for all that happens in the Gaza Strip. According to the IDF spokesperson, the IAF attacked some hundred Hamas targets through the Strip within hours after the launch, including the offices of Hamas's West Bank headquarters, located in the Rimal neighborhood of downtown Gaza City; an underground site for the central manufacturing of operational rockets; an outpost of Hamas's naval force; a military training compound that is also the center for Hamas's UAVs in the southern part of the Strip; and other outposts and underground infrastructures.

The next day, following the IDF attacks and Egypt's efforts to achieve calm, the Supreme National Authority, which coordinates the activities of all factions in the Strip, decided to stop the attacks on Israel and suspend the weekly Friday marches along the border. Islamic Jihad spokesman Daoud Shahab made it clear that the Palestinian factions and the Egyptians had been in contact during the night, that the factions welcomed the Egyptian efforts to institute a ceasefire, and that they were committed to observe it as long as Israel "ceases its aggression."

Egypt, having assumed responsibility for keeping the calm, has for the past year been deeply involved in mediating between Israel and Hamas, and among the Palestinian organizations. This time too, it succeeded in curbing any escalation. Cairo is acting in coordination with UN emissary Nikolay Mladenov and Jason Greenblatt, the US envoy to the Middle East, in order to demonstrate to the administration its critical importance in the arena and to make a regional statement. It seems that Egypt has promised the US administration (and perhaps also Israel) to prevent an eruption of violence on the Israel-Gaza border before the election.

Assessment

Both the rocket launch and the Israeli response are further evidence that Hamas continues its policy of defiance while controlling escalation and dictating the rules of the game with Israel. This means that Israel's policy of deterrence with regard to Hamas and the other organizations active in the Strip has been eroded. The most recent events underscore that as long as the organization's leadership feels threatened or pressured, even if the source is

internal/populist, it will opt for violent defiance toward Israel, knowing that Israel does not seek to topple it or destroy the organization's military capabilities. IDF operations in the Gaza Strip, which have always sought to strengthen Israel's deterrence, have had limited, if any, effect. Therefore, Israel must undertake an in-depth reassessment of its patterns of action.

Israel's current policy, which desires to contain escalation by easing the closure and strengthening deterrence, fails to deal with the area's fundamental problems. The Gaza Strip is experiencing a longstanding humanitarian crisis with no hope of reconstruction; it is ruled by Hamas, a radical element waging terrorist activity against Israel; and the chances that the PA will regain control of Gaza are rapidly diminishing. To resolve these problems, Israel may take one of two radical approaches.

One approach is to grant official recognition to the Hamas regime in the Gaza Strip and sever the area's connection with the West Bank. Consequently, the naval blockade would be lifted and the region opened to the outside world, not by way of Israel. The preferred route in and out of the Gaza Strip would be Egypt. To soften Cairo's resistance, it would be necessary to offer extensive international aid and begin economic projects in the northern part of the Sinai Peninsula that would serve both Egypt and the Gaza population. If the Egyptian route nonetheless stays closed, Israel will be forced to allow the construction of a seaport in Gaza to be operated by an international apparatus with passage of goods through a transit port in Cyprus or el-Arish, where security checks would be carried out to reduce the risk of weapons smuggling.

The second option is a military confrontation to dismantle the military wing of Hamas and the other terrorist organizations in the Gaza Strip. This would require a long, extensive operation that includes both ground maneuvers deep into the Strip and severe attacks on military infrastructures in the region, including fighters, weapons, tunnels, manufacturing and storage sites, and command and control outposts. The objective of such a campaign would be threefold: eliminating Hamas's ability to blackmail and harm Israel, to the point that its rule collapses; realizing and entrenching Israel's demand to disarm Palestinian areas of terrorist and military capabilities threatening Israel, which at this point applies only to PA-controlled areas in the West Bank; and creating the conditions to restore the Gaza Strip to PA control and promote a political move (in the spirit of Trump's peace plan) that includes extensive resources to reconstruct the Strip. If the PA initially refuses to accept responsibility for the Gaza Strip, it would be necessary to establish an international or pan-Arab mechanism – a type of trusteeship regime – to create the conditions the PA would need to return to the Strip or construct a mechanism for the population's self-rule. A military campaign would necessarily be long and result in many civilian and military casualties on both sides, and would therefore require broad

public support in Israel. At the same time, in any such scenario, the IDF must not remain in the Gaza Strip, even if no responsible element is found to govern the area. A military campaign to dismantle Hamas's military capabilities would create an infrastructure for a subsequent confrontation after the IDF forces depart to carry out raids as needed to dismantle terrorist infrastructures, as in the West Bank, and change the operational approach to terrorism.

The Israeli government is urged to abandon its concept of deterrence against Hamas because its validity has eroded, and instead strive to change its Gaza Strip policy as part of an effort to transform the area from the ground up. To pursue either option, Israel must display the will and preparedness for a large scale military confrontation against Hamas's military capabilities to change the rules of the game that have become rooted over recent years. Preparations for a military campaign must include the formulation of mechanisms, preferably international, to manage the Gaza Strip after the dismantlement of Hamas's capabilities and perhaps the collapse of its government. Concrete preparations for a military confrontation against Hamas's capabilities and government would change the organization's calculations. It would no longer be able to rely on its insurance policy that facilitates its violent defiance of Israel, based on both the notion that there is no substitute for its government and Israel's reluctance to engage in large scale military action.