

INSS Insight No. 1186, July 4, 2019

The Gaza Envelope: Has Societal Resilience Declined?

Carmit Padan and Meir Elran

Despite contentions that events of the past year have reduced the level of societal resilience in the Gaza envelope communities, a high and even improved level of systemic functioning prevails regarding the civilian capacity to stand up to immediate security challenges. In addition, the local population continues to increase, and construction is on the rise. The critical question is whether the continued "rounds of escalation" over time will negatively affect the high functional resilience in the area. It is possible that mental stress among the population and high societal resilience will coexist, especially if two conditions are met. The first (already extant) is that the local leaderships continue to provide a high level of basic services, including a reasonable response to the security disruptions. The second condition (which does not exist) is the government's provision of hope regarding the possibility of a sustainable solution that will prevent, or at least greatly reduce the recurring security disruptions in the region. The absence of a solution to the continued threat from Gaza and the ambiguity regarding Israel's approach to Hamas creates a vacuum that might have a detrimental impact on the resilience in the Gaza envelope.

Societal resilience, as defined through the prism of functionality, represents a system's capacity to contain the repercussions of a severe disruption, bounce back quickly, and resume normal and even improved functionality. Studies we conducted in the so-called Gaza envelope communities between 2006 and 2016 found societal resilience to be on a high level. The criteria considered in the previous research included organizational capacity, leadership, and social trust. The analysis attested to the localities' high functional capacity during Hamas attacks. Moreover, these same communities experienced impressive demographic, social, and economic growth between and following disruptions. This happened despite the ongoing threat in the region, which mushroomed in three rounds of violent clashes with Hamas, including Operation Protective Edge (summer 2014), which was notable for its 50-day long duration and the significant disruption it caused to daily life.

Since March 2018, there have been marked changes in the nature of the security threats along the Gaza border. After more than three and a half years of relative quiet, following the ceasefire that ended Operation Protective Edge, the Gaza envelope localities once

again came under intense security pressures. These comprised the "Marches of Return" along the border fence and explosive balloons and incendiary kites, which have caused numerous fires in the area that inflicted significant environmental damage and consistently disrupted daily life. These incidents join the ongoing harassment of the population in a variety of manners, as well as short but intense rounds of escalation, characterized by significant amounts of high trajectory fire (including anti-tank missiles launched directly at vehicles). The IDF responded with attacks on Hamas and Islamic Jihad military positions and limits on the Gaza fishing zone, and more recently, suspension of fuel supply to the power station in the Gaza Strip. Repeated occurrences of this kind have severely undermined the daily routine of the Israeli population, creating major psychological stress.

This article questions whether these trends have also resulted in a genuine change in the population's societal resilience, as has recently been argued by some people in the region. Indeed, various voices from the local population, public officials, and regional leaders have recently pointed to possible signs of a "crumbling of resilience" among individuals and the local communities. They contend that given common references to a "never-ending war of attrition," fear and uncertainty once again prevail in some of the communities, resulting in talk of leaving the area (especially among families with children), reduced numbers of potential new residents, the inability of the resilience centers to cope with the number of applicants, and the lack of hope for tranquility, or a long range truce, that will allow normal routine. "We've reached the saturation point" is a common metaphor used by the local population in describing their dire situation.

At the same time, as far as the civilian capacity to stand up to the immediate security challenges is concerned, a high and even improved level of systemic functioning prevails. The community and regional organs established in recent years (community emergency teams, resilience centers, war rooms, alert squads, firefighting teams, and a direct connection with the IDF's regional division) operate in optimal fashion. They address the needs of the population with dedication, professionalism, perseverance, sensitivity, and understanding regarding emotional needs, including the desire to temporarily exit the disrupted communities and "recharge batteries" following stressful escalations. In other words, the experienced civilian emergency systems function amidst a high level of civilian resilience, complemented by the multi-faceted strong and ongoing defense provided by the IDF.

Societal resilience is also measured by a continued momentum of civilian growth. For example, along with the negligible number of families who have chosen to leave the Gaza envelope, the past year has witnessed the continued absorption of new families: ten families were accepted as full members of Kibbutz Kfar Azza, another four families

joined Kibbutz Nahal Oz, and additional families are expected to settle in the area before the end of this year (the two kibbutzim are part of the Sha`ar Hanegev Regional Council, which in the past year alone has demonstrated impressive population growth, increasing from 5,000 to 8,700 residents). The nearby town of Sderot is also enjoying rapid growth, with the population jumping from approximately 23,000 residents in 2016 to more than 28,000 today.

In addition, and despite the ongoing security disruptions, there are no signs of a reduction in the area's impressive economic growth. Major new construction in Sderot and the rural localities is clearly visible. New economic projects are underway, such as the cooperation between Sderot and Sha`ar Hanegev in establishing a joint industrial park. The Gaza envelope continues – with the massive assistance of the state – to flourish and build itself as a thriving region, reflecting distinctive, stable resilience.

The critical question is whether the continued "rounds of escalation" over time, which create severe disruptions and therefore increase the sense of social stress and tension, will negatively affect the high functional resilience in the area. Although there is no unequivocal answer to this question, against the background of past experience in Israel and abroad regarding disruptions following natural and manmade events, it is not unconceivable that both phenomena – mental stress among residents and high societal resilience – will coexist, especially if, in the Israeli case, two conditions are met. The first (already extant) is that the local leaderships continue to provide a high level of basic services, including a reasonable response to the security disruptions, and more importantly, to build a "sense of togetherness," community, and belonging. The second condition (which does not exist) is the government's provision of hope regarding the possibility of a sustainable solution that will prevent, or at least greatly reduce the recurring security disruptions in the region. In the meantime, the government continues to project the lack of a clear policy vis-à-vis Hamas, and refrains from presenting an approach regarding the future solution to the ongoing conflict. The absence of a solution to the continued threat from Gaza and the ambiguity regarding Israel's approach to Hamas creates a vacuum that might have a detrimental impact on the resilience in the Gaza envelope that is a primary Israeli national interest.