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Fighting against Islamic Jihad:
Serving an Arrangement in the Gaza Strip
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The targeted killing of the commander of Islamic Jihad's northern brigade in the Gaza Strip and the ensuing days of battle against rocket and missile launches demonstrated Israel's intelligence-operational capabilities and the efficiency of the home front defense systems. At the same time, the conclusion of the campaign saw no reduction in the threat posed by the organizations in the Strip and their ability to pursue the force buildup process and present a security threat to Israel at any time they might choose to realize it. Departing from its traditional policy, Israel in the recent round did not designate Hamas as the responsible address for preventing launches from the Gaza Strip, and by not attacking targets linked to the organization and by minimizing harm to the Gaza civilian population, in effect allowed Hamas to avoid joining the fighting. Hamas's decision not to join the fighting indicates that it is looking toward an arrangement and is not combat-oriented, and constitutes a foundation for Israel's continuing to move forward on understandings with it for a long term ceasefire – without absolving it of responsibility to prevent terror from Gaza – in return for a significant easing of the closure and progress in employment and infrastructure reconstruction in the Gaza Strip.

The killing of Baha Abu al-Ata, the commander of Palestinian Islamic Jihad's (PIJ) al-Quds Brigades in the northern Gaza Strip, demonstrated Israel's intelligence-operational capabilities. When PIJ responded by launching missiles and rockets at Israel's home front, the IDF waged two days of battle while taking care to allow Hamas to avoid joining the emerging battle. The focus on attacking PIJ targets only, while minimizing collateral damage within the Strip, attested to the Israeli government's intention to continue to advance the process toward an arrangement with Hamas, which has already been underway for a long time with measured steps that have mostly been hidden from Israeli public view. And indeed, Israeli government spokespeople made clear that the PIJ commander was killed not just because he was responsible for most launches from Gaza at Israel in recent months, but also because this activity was intended to foil efforts by Israel and Hamas to implement and consolidate understandings to calm the security situation in the Gaza theater. According to Arab media sources, Israel even relayed a

message to the Palestinian factions in Gaza, via Egypt, that it was not interested in all-out escalation.

Hamas did indeed prefer to straddle the fence and avoid joining the combat that evolved between the IDF and PIJ. The independent action by PIJ – which, while supported militarily and logistically by Iran, was unlikely to have been orchestrated by it – challenges Hamas's ability to advance its current set of interests, which are broader than establishing legitimacy by demonstrating solidarity with resistance elements that do not obey it. This is especially so given the fear of a deterioration into confrontation with Israel. In Hamas's view, a broad confrontation would sabotage arrangement efforts led by Egypt, which have contributed to an improvement in civilian conditions in the Gaza Strip and the reconstruction following the destruction suffered during Operation Protective Edge (2014); it would also harm Hamas's contest for legitimacy with Fatah and the Palestinian Authority, waged nowadays against the backdrop of prospective Palestinian parliamentary elections.

In any event, by sitting on the sidelines Hamas raised questions about whether it has enough power to restrain Islamic Jihad when it has an interest to do so. Resorting to force against a "sister jihadi movement" clashes with Hamas's identity as a resistance movement that waves the flag of violent struggle against Israel. Nonetheless, and contrary to its ideology, Hamas this time around chose to serve as a force for restraint, and its determined decision not to join in the fighting and to leave PIJ alone in the campaign in effect helped abbreviate this round.

Over the two days of warfare, approximately 450 rockets were launched at Israel; the IDF focused on attacking PIJ launch units, field commanders, and manufacturing and storage infrastructures. There were 37 reported fatalities on the Palestinian side, 26 militants and the rest uninvolved civilians, including a number of children, and approximately 100 people wounded; in Israel, there were no fatalities and only limited infrastructure damage.

Given the mounting blows and the understanding within the PIJ leadership that it was fighting alone, it yielded to pressure and to an Egyptian ceasefire proposal. The organization's secretary-general, Ziyad al-Nakhalah, emphasized that "the movement reached a ceasefire agreement with Israel after agreeing, together with the other Palestinian factions, to an Egyptian proposal that implements the resistance's terms." According to the understanding that it presented as having achieved, the PIJ will cease its fire and ensure that the Marches of Return are held peacefully. Israel, for its part, will halt a policy of targeted killing in the Gaza Strip and West Bank (the IDF Spokesperson made clear that Israel is not resuming the targeted killing policy, remarks that drew criticism

from the political establishment); will cease shooting participants in the Marches of Return; and will commit to the Cairo understandings that relate to lifting the blockade from the Strip. No Israeli official confirmed these understandings. Al-Nakhalah further claimed that "Israel wants to isolate PIJ from the other factions, but though PIJ can sustain battle against Israel for many weeks, it acceded to the Egyptian appeal and the will of the other factions, and agreed to a ceasefire." In addition, the PIJ secretary-general threatened that an Israeli violation of any of the clauses would release the organization from its own obligations and be met with force.

The Cost-Benefit Balance for Hamas

Contrary to Hamas's stated ideology, and the fact that as part of operational coordination among various factions in the Gaza Strip it transferred information and possibly weaponry to PIJ, the organization did not join in the fighting. Hamas thus chose a pragmatic policy over action that would translate its ideology of violent resistance into action. Consequently:

- a. Hamas emerged bolstered, image-wise, from the round of fighting, especially as it did not get involved following various and repeated statements by the Israeli side that it was preferable that Hamas not join the fighting, as the confrontation would then spiral out of control and the damage to both sides would be far more painful.
- b. The Hamas leadership proved it does not fear criticism for avoiding resistance moves against Israel. Hamas is sensitive to the sentiments of an exhausted Palestinian public and understood there was no support for escalation. A main reason was progress in the arrangement process between Israel and Hamas. Had Hamas become involved in the fighting it would have risked bringing about a halt to, and failure of, a number of projects underway in the Strip, including the construction of infrastructures for electricity and water supply, and an increase in quotas for commerce at the crossing point and for the number of businesspeople and laborers allowed into Israel from the Strip. Similarly, Hamas would have risked muddying its improved ties with Egypt, which is a lifeline for it.
- c. Israel's focus in this round on fighting PIJ without striking at Hamas as the party responsible for what happens in the Gaza Strip constitutes a change in policy and in effect has the potential of discharging Hamas from responsibility for preventing terrorist activity from the Strip against the State of Israel in the future. In Hamas's view, it could also elude responsibility and argue, as it has claimed in the past, that it is not fully able to prevent terrorism emanating from the Strip.

The Balance for Israel

Israel, for its part, showed initiative, determination, and operational prowess in carrying out targeted killings in the Strip, thus strengthening its deterrence vis-à-vis the terrorist groups and their leaders:

- a. The multi-layer defense system worked efficiently and met the requisite achievement of minimizing damage to the population and infrastructures along the Gaza periphery and in the Israeli home front. Iron Dome batteries intercepted more than 90 percent of rockets/missiles launched at population centers in Israel. At the same time, the defense establishment, having initially projected graver damage, shut down broad stretches of the country and evinced a lack of confidence in its ability to deny Islamic Jihad's goal of hitting civilians and infrastructures.
- b. The improved defense granted the government leadership latitude, flexibility, and decision space, which allowed for precise action and control of escalation steps. It helped avoid a broad military operation, including land maneuvers to conquer all or parts of the Strip. That said, some in Israel have argued that such defense capabilities sap Israeli motivation for a high intensity offensive to change the fundamental situation in the Strip.
- c. The IDF demonstrated prowess in its precision strike on PIJ terror infrastructure, both below and above ground, destroying infrastructures for the manufacturing and storage of missiles as well as command centers. In this round of fighting, 26 PIJ commanders and operatives were killed, most of them in the course of the hunt for launch units.
- d. Israel enjoyed international support and legitimacy for its right to defend its citizens against missile and rocket attacks by terrorists.

Ramifications and Recommendations

Israel will need to decide soon whether to cling to the logic of discharging Hamas of responsibility for launches by PIJ and other factions at Israel. Perhaps the attack on Hamas targets on Saturday morning, in response to the ceasefire violation with the rockets launched at Beer Sheva, made clear that this was a one-time deviation in Israeli policy.

The last round did not change the overview of threats from the Gaza Strip. The organizations in the Strip retain capabilities that constitute a security threat to Israel, which can materialize at any time that attacks might serve their interests. A continuation of the existing situation, including if there is progress in the efforts between Israel and Hamas toward an arrangement, will not prevent the terror factions from continuing to build up their forces and threaten to disrupt routine life in Israel – and not just on the Gaza periphery. This situation, in addition to the asymmetry between the Strip and the West Bank, where Israel and the Palestinian Authority have instituted the principle of demilitarization by stripping the street of armed capabilities and preventing the emergence of terrorist infrastructures, could serve as a backdrop for a broad military campaign to dismantle the military capabilities of Hamas and the other militant

organizations in the Strip. And yet it is clear that even upon the conclusion of a broad military operation, which would perforce inflict significant damage and many casualties, there would be no viable alternative to Hamas rule that would be more convenient for Israel, and Israel would be hard-put to craft a lasting reality of stability and security quiet in that theater.

Therefore, now is the time to fully pursue all possibilities and opportunities to advance the understandings with Hamas, which today is focused far less on violent struggle and military confrontation with Israel than both on arrangement with it, and on elections in the Palestinian Authority and even reconciliation with Fatah. That the Israeli government chose Hamas, and not the Palestinian Authority, as the party with which to seek an arrangement in effect spells a weakening of the Palestinian Authority, which is the only legitimate party for a future accord. It is thus advisable to change this policy and work on two tracks: 1. Strengthen the Palestinian Authority by encouraging its transformation into a responsible, functioning, and stable Authority, and not sabotaging its reconciliation moves with Hamas, which could bring about its retaking of the reins of civilian management in the Gaza Strip; 2. Designating Hamas as the party responsible address for the Gaza Strip, out of a willingness to make progress on understandings for an extended ceasefire in exchange for a significant easing of the closure and pursuit of efforts to reconstruct infrastructure and improve employment in the Strip. The last round of fighting proves that at this stage, in order to reach understandings with Hamas, Israel is not required to carry out a broad military operation in the Strip that would utterly crush Hamas. This is due to the fact that regarding most of the issues in dispute – except the return of the Israeli civilians held by Hamas and the soldiers' remains – it is hard to envisage better conditions for agreements than those Hamas accepts today, and which it chose over the option of joining a military battle against Israel.