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Operation Guardian of the Walls: Envisioning the End

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Ten days of fighting in the Gaza Strip have again illustrated the dilemma of when, how, and under what conditions the campaign should be ended. While Hamas achieved the goals that it set for itself at the outset of the campaign – positioning itself as the defender of al-Aqsa and Jerusalem and leading the Palestinians in the struggle against Israel – Israel has not freed itself from the logic that guided its actions in previous rounds of conflict with Hamas, centering on strong deterrence. The strategic objective that the Israeli government should have formulated is attaining control over the conflict arena and preventing its expansion to additional arenas, while focusing on weakening Hamas – preventing it from gaining control over the Palestinian arena, reversing its military capabilities to at least their level of a decade ago, creating new rules of the game in the Palestinian arena, and restoring the Palestinian Authority to the status of the exclusive representative of the Palestinians, while looking ahead to the day after Abbas.

Ten days of fighting in the Gaza Strip have again illustrated Israel's dilemma of when, how, and under what conditions the campaign should be ended. This time, the challenge is more complex than in earlier asymmetric conflicts in the Gaza Strip (and in Lebanon), because Israel has become embroiled in a multi-front campaign: fighting against Hamas and the other terrorist organizations in the Gaza Strip, religious and national tension in Jerusalem, disturbances in mixed Jewish-Arab towns and cities in Israel, and the danger of an outbreak in the West Bank and in the northern arena.

Hamas achieved the goals that it set for itself at the outset of the campaign. The organization positioned itself as the defender of al-Aqsa and Jerusalem; launched rocket salvos deep in Israeli territory, causing 12 fatalities and hundreds of wounded; heightened civil unrest in mixed Jewish-Arab towns in Israel by encouraging young Arabs to take part in disorders and attack Jews; aroused riots in the West Bank; and above all emphasized that it is the leader of the Palestinian camp, while demonstrating the weakness of the Palestinian Authority (PA).

While trying to reduce the linkage between the different arenas as much as possible, Israel has focused on the confrontation against Hamas. It is treating the fighting as yet another

round in the ongoing conflicts with terrorist organizations, with the main objective being prolonged calm and postpone of the next round. Israel strives to deter Hamas with the knowledge of the high price the organization will pay for its aggression, weaken its military power, and puncture its ability to rebuild its forces. Israel's overall strategy against Hamas, however, has not changed during the campaign. Israel casts Hamas as the responsible party in the Gaza Strip, without threatening its position as the ruler there, and differentiates clearly between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank.

The declared strategic goal of the Israeli government, as presented by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, is that "Hamas will think twice next time before shooting at us." This goal, however, does not address Hamas's aim of attaining the leading position in the overall Palestinian arena and its willingness to pay high prices in order to dictate ceasefire terms to Israel from a position of strength. This Israeli strategy has no defining political aspect or objective, and makes no effort to envision any horizon and new political options. In practice, it appears that Israel has not freed itself from the logic that guided its actions in previous rounds of conflict with Hamas, which centered on achieving tangible deterrence and a ceasefire without any commitments after the end of the fighting. Israel shows its power, improved defensive capabilities, endurance, and internal and international legitimacy. All of these objectives are important, but they are insufficient.

The strategic objective that the Israeli government should have formulated and presented is attaining control over the theater of war and preventing its expansion to additional arenas, while focusing on weakening Hamas – preventing it from gaining control over the Palestinian arena, weakening its military capabilities to at least their level of a decade ago, creating new rules of the game in the Palestinian arena, and restoring the PA to the status of the exclusive representative of the Palestinians, while looking ahead to when Abbas departs the scene.

Why is Israel Unable to Halt the Conflict in Time?

In asymmetric conflicts against non-state actors, it is almost impossible to achieve a victory in which the enemy declares that it is unable and/or unwilling to continue fighting or consolidate its military infrastructure. In conflicts of this type, Israel's strategic goal is therefore victory, measured by three parameters:

- a. Meeting the targets set by the political leadership, which are usually the minimum necessary in order to pass the electoral or political test, or that set by the post-war investigative commissions. The IDF indeed achieved the political leadership's targets, severely damaging Hamas, weakening it, deterring it, restraining it, and using these achievements to restrain the other terrorist groups. These targets, however, do not alter the strategic situation, and will not weaken Hamas's leading status in the Palestinian arena.

- b. Imposing a ceasefire on terms dictated by Israel, and in the current campaign, it is essential that the ceasefire terms do not grant Hamas the strategic achievement for which it is fighting – emerging as the "defender of al-Aqsa" and "leader of the Palestinian camp." At the tactical level, the objective is to prevent Hamas from dictating terms of an arrangement, such as widespread opening of the Gaza Strip border crossings and reconstruction, without an effective mechanism for preventing Hamas's rearmament.
- c. Stratagems at the operative level – i.e., surprises and minimization of Hamas's military accomplishments. Israel responded with unexpected force in attacking Hamas's underground infrastructure, cracking the organization's secrecy, attacking homes of leading Hamas members, and striking multiple rocket launchers. These join the impressive defensive capability that thwarted all of Hamas's operations from the Gaza Strip, other than rocket fire.

Israel has recorded important *achievements at the strategic level*: first and foremost, calm has been restored in Jerusalem and in cities and towns with mixed Jewish-Arab populations, and the inter-arena linkage has been weakened. In addition, further escalation in other arenas of conflict in the north and in the West Bank has been prevented. Moreover, Israel is enjoying support from the United States and recognition by the international community that it is not the aggressor, and has been forced to defend its citizens through the means at its disposal.

Achievements at the operative level: (1) The IDF has destroyed a large portion of the tunnels used by Hamas for concealment, undetected movement, and surprising IDF forces in the event of a land maneuver in the Gaza Strip by IDF ground forces. Hamas's "strategic backbone," as the tunnel network is called, has been lost. (2) The IDF has eliminated Hamas commanders (some of whom were denied the option of concealment in the tunnels). The heads of Hamas's weapons production and development apparatus were killed, and five Hamas and Islamic Jihad division commanders were eliminated. (3) Most of the Hamas and Islamic Jihad rocket and missile production system has been destroyed, and rebuilding it will take many years. (4) In the course of the fighting, Israel has developed the ability to detect multiple rocket launchers rapidly, most of which are kept underground, and to hit them hard. (5) The IDF has successfully intercepted 90 percent of the rockets and missiles in flight en route to strategic targets and urban areas in Israel, mainly through the Iron Dome, as well as unmanned attack vehicles and submarines, thereby minimizing loss of life. Of assistance in this achievement was obedience by civilians to Home Front Command directives. (6) The IDF assembled a list of targets during the fighting that facilitated continuation of the military pressure, while reducing the collateral damage. This has made continuation of the military activity possible.

All of this shows that Israel has taken full advantage of the use of stand-off capabilities, without the use of ground forces within the Gaza Strip. From this stage onwards, the operational outcome will dwindle. Even a critical blow to Hamas will not suppress its missile launching capability. The political leadership and defense leaders fear, however, that a "critical blow" that will deter Hamas and Islamic Jihad from the next round, while at the same time rendering unnecessary the devising of a new political strategy for the Palestinian arena, which Israel has avoided for many years, has not yet been achieved. Another argument in favor of delivering such a blow is that Israel's enemies, headed by Iran and Hezbollah, are liable to reach an erroneous conclusion about Israel's power and endurance.

Exit Mechanism

In establishing an exit mechanism, Israel aims to unilaterally dictate a date and conditions for ending the campaign, and to prevent Hamas from controlling the process. As a lesson from previous rounds, no document of principles for an arrangement should be formulated before a ceasefire, and Egypt and Hamas should not be allowed to stretch out the end and soften Israel's military achievement, as occurred with Operation Protective Edge.

A Hamas spokesman said that the mediators were only interested in a two-sided ceasefire, and that "the resistance opposes this, because it wants to force Israel to halt its acts of aggression against Jerusalem and the holy places before agreeing to calm or a ceasefire." The spokesman added, "The resistance will continue attacking the Israeli home front as long as Israel continues attacking civilian buildings and high-rises in the Gaza Strip."

The IDF, however, is close to exhausting the military targets in the operation, and is therefore willing to move toward a quick end to the fighting, and to respond positively to the request by the United States that it do so. The end of the confrontation in the Gaza Strip will also have a moderating and soothing effect on the other arenas at risk of unintended flare-up. Preference should therefore be given to the simple principle of a ceasefire – calm in return for calm. In this framework, the Egyptian mediation idea – a coordinated ceasefire (while avoiding involvement by Qatar and Turkey in the mediation efforts) – should be accepted. Since Israel in any case cannot accept Hamas's demand for concessions on Jerusalem, the Israeli attacks can be halted unilaterally, while assessing Hamas's response and without making demands for an arrangement after the fighting ends. If Hamas continues launching rockets, Israel will resume the use of proportionate or even greater force, after obtaining renewed international legitimacy.

Only after calm is achieved should measures toward an arrangement be considered, particularly those that will avoid a humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip. First of all, the entry of aid into the Gaza Strip should be made contingent on the existence of an effective

mechanism for preventing a military buildup by Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Israel should also prevent blackmail by Hamas, which enabled the entry of money from Qatar into the Gaza Strip that was then used for military buildup. In the future, prevention of renewed military buildup and the return of prisoners and the bodies of missing Israeli soldiers by Hamas can be discussed when the organization appeals to the international community for help in relieving the severe civilian distress in the Gaza Strip.

In order to neutralize manipulation and claims of victory by Hamas, it is essential to strengthen the PA, led by the Fatah movement, to conduct large-scale arrests of Hamas operatives in the West Bank in coordination with the PA security apparatuses, and to prevent Hamas from influencing the Palestinian agenda, including in the framework of the struggle for control after Abbas leaves the scene.

If there are favorable conditions for an arrangement with Egyptian mediation, the following options should be considered:

1. Architecture for an arrangement should be designed with the PA and over the head of Hamas leadership, in order to deprive Hamas of recognition, status, and achievements. Hamas should be left only with tactical elements of an arrangement, resulting from its responsibility for managing life in the Gaza Strip.
2. Improved elements of an arrangement (based on the elements reached at the end of previous rounds of escalation) – opening the border crossings to the passage of goods and people in exchange for a ceasefire; adding a demand for an end to the incendiary balloons and halting the harassment activity along the security barrier on the border between Israel and the Gaza Strip; return of Israeli prisoners and bodies of Israeli soldiers held by Hamas in a reasonable deal; reconstruction of the Gaza Strip on condition that an effective international mechanism for preventing a military buildup is instituted, with the PA included in the reconstruction projects; construction of a seaport in the Gaza Strip – only after the PA's civilian and security control there is restored.
3. Promotion of a regional and international mechanism for reconstructing and stabilizing the Gaza Strip, on condition that reconstruction includes the denial of rearmament by terrorist groups, with the participation of the pragmatic Arab countries, while preventing negative influence by Iran, Qatar, and Turkey on Hamas and Islamic Jihad.
4. Strengthening the status of Jordan on the Temple Mount, with an emphasis on responsibility for preventing provocations on the site by Muslim extremists. At the same time, Israel should restrict the activity by extremist Jewish groups in violation of the status quo.

5. A change in Israel's strategy in the Palestinian arena – in contrast to its policy to date, Israel should strengthen the PA, necessarily at the expense of Hamas. The vision should be to give hope to those who are not part of the circle of violence and terrorism by providing civil and economic benefits and promote a political dialogue. Israel should present a goal consisting primarily of renewing the political process with the PA, even if this is solely for the purpose of agreeing on incremental transitional arrangements aimed at improving the security and civilian situation on the ground, with no intended progress toward a permanent settlement.