

Operation Breaking Dawn: Following the Successful Entry, an Exit Strategy is Required

Udi Dekel | No. 1628 | August 7, 2022

Israel surprised Palestinian Islamic Jihad on Friday afternoon, August 5, 2022, when the IDF killed the organization's commander of the northern Gaza Strip and thwarted units arrayed to attack Israelis in the Gaza perimeter. In the conditions created so far, and particularly with Hamas outside the military campaign, Israel has an interest in a rapid end to the fighting, in spite of its declared readiness for a lengthy campaign. However, it is not clear if it has the ability to revalidate the rules of the game that have applied in the Gaza Strip since Operation Guardian of the Walls, and in particular the separation between the Strip and the West Bank, and assign to Hamas the responsibility for preventing terror and escalation in Gaza.

The Start of this Round

On Friday afternoon, August 5, 2022, the IDF surprised the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) with the targeted killing of Tayseer Jabari, the commander of the northern Gaza Strip area, who was responsible for extensive terror activity and for preparing the organization earlier that week to carry out attacks from northern Gaza. Concomitantly, within 180 seconds, the commander of the organization's anti-tank array in northern Gaza and bands of terrorists, who were on their way to firing anti-tank missiles and sniping at Israelis in the Gaza perimeter were stopped. In this way, the IDF thwarted the PIJ's preparations to attack Israelis in response to the arrest of Bassam al-Saadi, a PIJ senior figure in the West Bank.

While Israel limited civilian activity close to the Strip because of the threat of PIJ fire, and allowed the Egyptians, with the knowledge of Hamas, to try and mediate possible benefits with the PIJ in return for restraint – such as less pressure on the organization in the West Bank – the IDF readied itself

for an attack in the Strip against Islamic Jihad, and reinforced its defenses in all areas, including the deployment of air defense batteries.

After the shock of the first strike, PIJ recovered and resumed launching hundreds of rockets (some 600 so far, most of which were intercepted by IDF aerial defense) and mortar fire from the Strip into Israel. Thus far the fire has mainly targeted the Israeli communities near the Gaza Strip, although there were also attempts to send rockets toward central Israel, the Tel Aviv area, and early Sunday morning August 7, at Jerusalem as well, as groups of Jews were en route to the Temple Mount to mark the fast of Tisha B'Av (which commemorates the destruction of both Jewish temples). In response, the IDF continued attacking PIJ targets in the Strip, with an emphasis on the targeted killing of senior PIJ commanders (such as Khaled Mansour, commander of the southern Gaza area), and attacks on rocket and mortar shell production sites, command posts, and weapons stockpiles. The IDF is also working to locate and neutralize groups firing rockets into Israel.

At this stage, while Hamas allows Islamic Jihad to continue firing at Israel, it has refrained from joining the fighting. In an interview on *al-Mayadeen*, a pro-Iranian Lebanese TV channel, Ziyad al-Nakhalah, general secretary of Islamic Jihad, vowed to take revenge: "The enemy must expect war and not a ceasefire...Today is the principal test for the Palestinian resistance, and the elements of the resistance must stand together." He thereby expressed criticism of Hamas for remaining on the sidelines. Al-Nakhalah added that "jihad has no red lines, no ceasefire, and no mediators...Tel Aviv will fall to the rockets of resistance, like all the towns of Israel."

Who is the Main Driving Force?

The arrest of al-Saadi in the West Bank was leverage for PIJ to escalate the situation in Gaza. As a militant "resistance" organization, it has trouble accepting the formula for maintaining calm in the Strip while Israel takes determined action against its infrastructures in the West Bank in the framework of Operation Break the Wave. Indeed, the name given by PIJ to the campaign is "United Zones."

Not by chance, al-Nakhalah was in Iran last week and met with senior members of the regime, including President Ebrahim Raisi and Revolutionary Guards commanders. Iran supports deterrence of Israel by its proxies, led by Hezbollah (which is sending threats relating to the negotiations between Lebanon and Israel over the maritime border and arrangements for pumping gas in the Mediterranean), and apparently encouraged the PIJ general secretary to respond to the attack on the organization in the West Bank with fire from the Gaza Strip. Iran has an interest in escalation in the Gaza area in order to draw the attention of the international community to the region while it negotiates a return to the nuclear deal and the lifting of sanctions. In this context, over the last two years coordination meetings between the Palestinian factions have been held in Lebanon, with the participation of senior Hezbollah personnel, including its leader Hassan Nasrallah.

Israel's Objectives in the Campaign

Israel has defined four objectives in the campaign: "Precise thwarting of an immediate threat" as Prime Minister Yair Lapid expressed it in a public announcement; differentiation of the West Bank from the Gaza Strip in the fight against terror – preventing a situation of firing from Gaza in response to counterterror activity in the West Bank; keeping Hamas out of the cycle of fighting, as the address for Israel's efforts to improve the fabric of life and maintain calm in the Gaza Strip, and as Lapid clarified: "Our fight is not with the residents of Gaza (but) with Islamic Jihad, an Iranian proxy that wants to destroy the State of Israel and kill innocent Israelis"; and as the fighting continues, a fourth objective was added: inflicting a fatal strike on Islamic Jihad wherever it may be, and in this framework, targeted killing of senior commanders, stripping PIJ of its capabilities in the Strip, and strikes against groups firing rockets and mortar shells.

What is the Exit Strategy?

In the conditions created so far, Israel has an interest in a rapid end to the fighting, in spite of its declared readiness for a long campaign. Therefore, it gave the Egyptians a green light to start mediating a ceasefire. It seems that

the main challenge for Israel is to end the fighting while keeping Hamas outside the campaign. The key to escalation or calm is currently in the hands of Hamas, and not the Egyptian mediators; Hamas will decide whether to escalate or calm the situation. The question is, how can Hamas be prompted to exert pressure on PIJ to stop launching rockets. But Hamas, which identifies itself as the leader of the Palestinian resistance camp, finds it hard to take an open stand against the activities of other Palestinian factions, and above all against PIJ: Hamas is stretched between a number of identities – a resistance organization, a religious Islamic movement, a popular social movement, a Palestinian national organization, and above all, the ruler of the Gaza Strip. As the ruler of Gaza, unlike PIJ, it has responsibility for the situation of the Palestinian population. If the fighting continues, and particularly if the uninvolved local population is hurt, it will be hard for Hamas to remain outside the campaign.

While Israel fights against Islamic Jihad, its strategy toward Hamas and the Gaza Strip is challenged. Israeli policy maintains that significant improvement in the economic and employment situation in the Strip (including by means of granting work permits for up to 20,000 Gazans in Israel, extending the scope of goods and raw materials entering and leaving the Strip, and allowing money transfers from Qatar and fuel for the power station supplying the Strip with electricity) will lead to ongoing calm and restrain Hamas from escalating the situation and prevents other factions from attacking Israel from Gaza. The government is well aware that this policy strengthens Hamas and its control of the Strip, as well as its status in the internal Palestinian competition against the Palestinian Authority and Fatah. According to Israeli logic, the economic relief does indeed strengthen Hamas, but also raises the price of its loss in case of escalation, and this should therefore motivate Hamas to restrain terrorist elements in the Strip. Hamas has so far not joined in the fighting this round, but it is not exercising its responsibility in preventing PIJ preparations to strike at Israel. The main question is, how long will it sit on the sidelines, and will it exert pressure on the PIJ to stop the escalation?

If Hamas chooses to join in the fighting, Israel will have to change the rules of the game: cancel all the benefits granted to Hamas and the Strip, based on an understanding that its identity as a resistance movement takes precedence and does not allow it to perform a long-term stabilizing role. If this is how events unfold, Israel must examine two alternatives – full closure of the crossings between the Strip and Israel, or ongoing attacks against the military wing of Hamas and its capabilities in the Strip. This will demand determination and patience, with the ability to absorb growing challenges on the Israeli home front, while standing firm against international pressure, including from Egypt (since the only supply pipeline to the Strip will then pass through Egypt). There are two ways out of this situation: the positive one – Hamas decides to comply with the understandings regarding ongoing calm; or sinking into a high intensity military campaign, requiring ground maneuvers into the Strip in order to inflict serious damage on the military wing of Hamas (compounded by the difficulty of shaping a better end state).

If Israel is worried about the negative consequences of extending the campaign should Hamas join the action and is unwilling to accept a dramatic change in the rules of the game, then it must work for a rapid end to the fighting, preferably mediated by Egypt. If Egyptian mediation proves ineffective, Israel must even weigh a unilateral ceasefire, for example by announcing a humanitarian ceasefire to allow the entry of fuel and aid to the civilian population. However, such a move means leaving any decision about the rules of the game in the hands of Hamas.

Editors of the series: Anat Kurtz, Eldad Shavit and Judith Rosen