

Operation Cast Lead, January 2009: An Interim Assessment

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This issue of *Strategic Assessment* goes to press soon after the end of the fighting in Gaza, a result of Israel's unilateral ceasefire that was followed suit by Hamas. The diplomatic campaign, mandated to capitalize on the achievements of the military campaign and create a lasting stable situation wherein the Gaza Strip will no longer serve as a platform for attacks against Israel, is still in its early stages. Consequently, it is hard to assess fully to what extent the objectives of the fighting in Gaza were achieved, not in terms of the immediate military successes, rather in terms of creating a new situation vis-à-vis the Gaza Strip, which was the government's stated goal of the war.

The military achievements of the campaign are obvious and significant. The IDF succeeded in attaining complete control of the operational field at every stage and dictating the campaign's evolution. Hamas did not manage to foil Israeli military objectives and failed in its attempts to extract substantive costs from Israel in the course of the fighting. The terrible destruction of Gaza and the large number of casualties there versus the very low number of casualties and minimal damage to property on the Israeli side demonstrate in concrete terms the gulf separating the balance sheets of the two sides. Hamas, which had hoped to mirror Hizbollah's achievements in the Second Lebanon War, failed utterly, and the only success it could flaunt was its ability to launch a small number of rockets every day until the end of the operation. Nonetheless, from the outset of these operations it was absolutely clear to all involved actors that the only military way to stop rocket launches completely was by reoccupying Gaza in its entirety.

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Israel sought to avoid this move not out of military constraints rather because of the political cost of reoccupying Gaza and controlling it over the long term. The superiority demonstrated by the IDF's ground forces in all the battles and the low number of casualties made it clear that in terms of casualties, Israel can in fact reoccupy the entire Gaza Strip at a low and tolerable cost.

The military achievements may be attributed to the painstaking preparations made by the IDF for the campaign. Of particular note was the comprehensive and detailed intelligence gathering and its use to develop tactical and technological responses to the challenges prepared by Hamas for the expected confrontation, including very powerful explosive charges intended to destroy tanks, anti-tank missiles, booby-trapped houses, tunnels designed to allow surprise attacks by Hamas units, and more. Control of the air and the air force's precision weaponry capabilities made a decisive contribution to the successes of the campaign.

At one level, then, and on the basis of these military achievements, the war's objective was met. If the goal was to prevent the Gaza Strip from serving as a base for attacks against Israel and the way chosen was to attain a new balance of deterrence vis-à-vis Hamas, one that would make it clear to the organization that militarily it is far weaker than it had thought and that it paid a far steeper cost than it anticipated it would have to pay in any violent confrontation, then the objective was met: there is now a new balance of deterrence and it will have a major effect on Hamas' future considerations.

The central question is how to preserve this achievement over time. This can be done only through constructing a political system that will support the ceasefire and appropriate responses on Israel's part to ceasefire violations. The central dilemma for the Israeli government is how to do this without conferring political legitimacy on Hamas. For the time being, it is not clear if the diplomatic process taking place as part of the campaign and in its wake will indeed generate a ceasefire agreement with Hamas via Egyptian brokerage. In the meantime, and to some extent to compensate for the lack of such agreement, Israel is trying to arrive at agreements with third parties – the United States, the European Union, and Egypt – to prevent the rearming of Hamas. In this

context, Egypt continues to be the key, as only Egypt, even if with the help of other nations, can in fact prevent the flow of arms into Gaza.

The process of rebuilding Gaza will also become a source of contention between the various players. On the one hand are the Palestinian Authority, the axis of moderate Arab states, and the Western nations that will aim to be the rebuilders of Gaza without conferring legitimacy on Hamas and strengthening it, and on the other hand, there is the axis of defiance headed by Iran that will strive to strengthen Hamas through the rebuilding process. For the different actors, this will constitute the continuation of the military campaign and the diplomatic campaign by different means, to paraphrase Clausewitz's famous saying: "War is nothing more than the continuation of politics by other means."

An important aspect of the fighting in Gaza was the effect on the internal Palestinian system and on the Israeli-Palestinian political process. It is still not clear if the fighting weakened or strengthened Hamas politically in relation to the government in Ramallah. There are arguments for both sides. On the one hand, Hamas showed itself to have miscalculated by dragging over one and a half million Palestinians into an awful war in which its own performance was abysmal. On the other hand, the government in Ramallah was viewed to some extent by the Palestinians as collaborators with Israel, and this, coupled with the horrible pictures from Gaza, certainly did not add to the PA's popularity. Nevertheless, if the situation vis-à-vis the Gaza Strip proves stable and calm and it is possible to keep Hamas in its weakened state, it is safe to assume that it will be possible to continue the political process on the basis of the Annapolis Conference, which aims at empowering the government in Ramallah, with greater ease.

In any case, however, Operation Cast Lead did not eradicate Hamas. The organization still maintains a significant portion of its military capability, and it can presumably renew its effective control of the entire Gaza Strip. This represents a big difference from the IDF's successes in the West Bank during and subsequent to Operation Defensive Shield in 2003. In both operations, the IDF demonstrated the ability to operate wherever it

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wanted at a reasonable price, but in the West Bank this was achieved at the cost of destroying the governmental system and creating a situation in which there was no partner for Israel to talk to. In the Gaza Strip, the situation is different, and one may well assume that even after the operation there will be a functioning Hamas government that will be able to impose its rule throughout the Gaza Strip. Israel's ability to deter the other side may be built precisely on this point. Hamas will also continue to be a central political player that to a large extent holds the key to an effective political process with the Palestinians.

Another important aspect of the campaign was the ability to maintain the calm in the West Bank. This may be attributed to the effective actions taken by Israel and the PA, but it seems that the main reason lies in the mood of the Palestinian public, which could sympathize with the purpose of this campaign but could sense the terrible damage to the Palestinian people caused by Hamas' unnecessary provocations. This is also a strong indication that Hamas' political and terrorist infrastructure in the West Bank is shattered. Hamas did not manage to launch even a single suicide attack from the West Bank despite its many threats, nor did it manage to spur the Palestinian public to mass protests.

Finally, one must not ignore the cost of this campaign, and in particular the great damage done to the Gaza civilian population. It is doubtful whether it was possible to prevent it in this type of war in which one side, Hamas, conducted the war against the civilian population of the other side from its own civilian population, despite all the efforts made to minimize the harm to civilians. Israel is paying a price for these casualties both in the negative effect on its image in the world and in the effect on its relations with the Arab world.

Notes

This article is an initial response to Israel's recent campaign in Gaza. A more comprehensive review of Operation Cast Lead and its repercussions will appear in a separate issue of *Strategic Assessment*.