Deterrence:
The Campaign against Hamas

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While it is still too early to determine the long term effects of the campaign against Hamas, some ramifications can already be discerned. In addition, it is worthwhile comparing them to the effects of the campaign against Hizbollah in 2006, specifically with regard to deterrence.

Deterrence against Sub-State or Semi-State Organizations

Though deterrence is a complex posture, it is relatively simpler when applied against states than when applied against sub-state organizations. The cost-benefit calculus of terrorist organizations differs from that of sovereign states, and overall, deterrence against these organizations is quite difficult, though not entirely impossible.

In the two campaigns that Israel launched in the past thirty months, the adversaries were not pure sub-state organizations. Both Hizbollah and Hamas are first of all political organizations built on extensive civil and social services infrastructures with deep roots in their host populations. Indeed, Hamas presently operates as the government of the Gaza Strip, which thereby assumes the guise of a state. This no doubt affects Hamas' cost/benefit calculus.

The success of deterrence against organizations such as Hamas and Hizbollah depends on the extent to which they come closer to being governments or semi-governments. The closer they are to recognizable governments, the more they are vulnerable to deterrence threats. As in the case of states, deterrence of these organizations depends on the

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cost/benefit balance of the status quo versus costs involved in violation of the status quo. These organizations can also deter Israel to an extent, partly through limited violent means such as the use of rockets. This, however, has its limitations, since if these operations accumulate, Israel can use its superior military capabilities to launch punitive actions, as it did in 2006 against Hizbollah and again in Operation Cast Lead.

The Israeli-Hamas "Strategic Dialogue"

While Hamas has become a semi-state, its extreme anti-Israel ideological stance has continued to affect its behavior and probably contributed to readiness to use force as an instrument of policy. Nevertheless, in March 2005 Fatah and Hamas unilaterally accepted the *hudna* (ceasefire), but this did not halt the violence between Hamas and Israel completely.

Prior to the Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip in 2005, Hamas resorted to violence in order to demonstrate its ostensible contribution to the Israeli withdrawal. Following the Hamas victory in the Palestinian elections in January 2006, Hamas interpreted the *hudna* as applying to the West Bank as well, an interpretation Israel did not accept. The result was continued outbreaks of violence when Hamas and Islamic Jihad reacted to Israeli operations in the West Bank. These disagreements about interpretation persisted after the Hamas coup in 2007 when it became the sole ruling power in Gaza. Only in the last *hudna* did Hamas in fact give up this demand. In addition, there were disagreements over the control and volume of traffic through the border crossings that led to acts of violence and ceasefire violations. The result was an imperfect balance of deterrence coupled with acts of coercion by both sides. Hamas targeted Israeli civilian settlements with rockets, and Israel reacted in a limited way with controlled force and crossings closures. As was the case with Hizbollah in 2006, Hamas misjudged the Israeli tolerance threshold and launched a major rocket attack on December 24, 2008, which was the final provocation before Israel embarked on a major counter strike.

The Second Lebanon War and Operation Cast Lead

When Israel launched its campaign against Hizbollah in 2006, it announced far reaching objectives, including a complete change of the situation in southern Lebanon and the destruction of Hizbollah. These

were entirely unrealistic and certainly unattainable through military methods. The restoration of the balance of deterrence between Israel and Hizbollah was not defined as an objective. In fact, however, while the far reaching objectives were not accomplished (as indeed they could not be), Israel did succeed in establishing stable deterrence against Hizbollah. This was amply demonstrated during Operation Cast Lead,[1] in which Hizbollah was deterred from resorting to military activity in solidarity with its allies in Gaza.

In Operation Cast Lead, Israel defined much more limited objectives, chief among them creating better security conditions for southern Israel, a euphemism for a strong deterrent posture against Hamas' ongoing attacks. After three weeks of fighting, Israel agreed to accept the Egyptian proposal for a ceasefire and other measures. In turn Hamas announced a ceasefire that has largely been upheld. In view of the tremendous damage incurred in Gaza, it is very likely that Hamas will adhere to the ceasefire. Thus, notwithstanding minor violations in the initial stages, the objective of stable deterrence has probably been accomplished. By deterrence parameters, the Israeli strike was both the exercise of a deterrent threat as well as a deterrence signal about future Israeli action should Hamas resort again to violence.

Military Tools for Establishing Deterrence

The most effective instrument for punitive action is the air force. Therefore, it is quite possible that following the initial days of air strikes, the deterrence effect could have been secured. This is certainly a valid assessment for what occurred vis-à-vis Hizbollah. Under conditions such as these only the use of disproportionate force can achieve the reestablishment of stable deterrence. The use of ground forces in Operation Cast Lead possibly served the purpose of advancing the Egyptian initiative for a ceasefire, but its contribution to deterrence is a highly complex question, beyond the scope of this discussion.

Conditions for Stable Deterrence

Hamas has become the de facto government of the semi-state of Gaza. As a political movement and not only an armed organization, it has assumed responsibility for the Gazan population. Precisely because of that it is sensitive to Israeli punitive actions against the Gaza

infrastructure. Consequently, Israeli deterrence based on its expected future punitive actions – if Hamas violates the ceasefire – is much more robust. Hamas must also have effective control over the other armed organizations in Gaza. On the other hand, there might be causes for instability related to Fatah-Hamas conflicts and the control over the other armed organizations. In addition, though deterrence is based in the first place on the expected costs resulting from the deterrer's punitive actions, its robustness would be undercut if the deteree suffers high costs from the status quo. Thus Hamas will probably insist on full reopening of the crossings; otherwise ceasefire violations are likely. While Israel is seeking a total ceasefire, the problems mentioned here might lead to a situation in which Hamas is deterred from rocket attacks on populated areas but it (or other organizations) might initiate from time to time limited local attacks.

The Israel-Hamas Paradoxical Relationship

For Israeli deterrence to be stable, the Hamas semi-government should be in effective control. However, this challenges the basic Israeli political posture, which seeks to undermine its rule. Yet for its part, Israel is self-deterred from reoccupying the Gaza Strip – which it could certainly accomplish by military means – since it understands that reoccupation might lead to an extended presence in Gaza with attendant high costs. This paradoxical situation could change if the political circumstances shift, i.e., if another power assumes control of the Gaza Strip. This could be secured, for example, if a coalition of Fatah and Hamas becomes the central authority in Gaza.

Notes

1   For the analysis and forecast that the 2006 war established stable deterrence vis-à-vis Hizbollah, see Yair Evron, "Deterrence and its Limitations," *Strategic Assessment* 9, no. 2 (2006), and Yair Evron, "Deterrence and its Limitations," in *The Second Lebanon War: Strategic Perspectives*, eds. Shlomo Brom and Meir Elran (Tel Aviv: Yediot Ahronot, 2007).