

Operation Cast Lead: The Diplomatic Dimension

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Three issues continued to engage the international community even after the last Israeli soldier left the Gaza Strip. One is the (dis)proportionality of Israel's response to the Qassam rocket attacks on Israelis, the second is Israel's use of certain types of weapons and ammunition, and the third is Israel's firing on buildings belonging to international institutions operating in the Gaza Strip. The preoccupation with these topics is the price Israel will have to pay in order to establish, to the extent possible, a new equation in its asymmetrical war against terrorist organizations operating against it from within innocent or semi-innocent civilian populations.

In Operation Cast Lead, Israel eased some of the restrictions the military and political echelons had imposed on the IDF in the Second Lebanon War and other previous conflicts. For example, IDF forces intentionally targeted mosques and schools based on information that these institutions were used as weapons and ammunition caches or were sheltering Hamas armed fighters. The low key response to these incidents from the Muslim world represents a tacit admission of sorts regarding the use of these facilities as bases of military operations against Israel. At the same time, new restrictions were imposed, such as not using cluster bombs – in part because of the criticism from the United States and the world at large following their widespread use in 2006.

Three reasons can help explain the departure from certain operational norms of previous wars. The first was the desire to minimize, to the extent possible, the number of casualties among the Israeli fighting

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forces, a predictable reaction to the Second Lebanon War. The second was the solid information regarding the use of civilian institutions, i.e., schools, mosques, and international facilities. The third has to do with the identity of the enemy, in this case Hamas. The political echelon deciding on Operation Cast Lead was correct in assuming that the international community would demonstrate a greater level of tolerance for Israel's conduct given that it was fighting an organization boycotted and criticized by European nations, the United States, and most Arab governments.¹

The preoccupation of the international political leadership with these issues will be affected by several factors: Israel's own internal preoccupation with these questions, particularly regarding the use of certain types of ammunition; the speed of the humanitarian and infrastructure rehabilitation in Gaza; the scope of cooperation Israel will demonstrate with regard to this activity; and finally, the international political atmosphere that will prevail as a result of the Israeli elections, the formation of a new government, and its approach to renewing the political process with the Palestinians.

The timing of the military operation in Gaza and its conclusion demonstrate that the outgoing Israeli government took international considerations into account. The withdrawal of the last Israeli soldier from Gaza hours before the new United States president was sworn into office testifies to this point. In addition, the creation of the "humanitarian corridor" during the course of the operation points to the (justified) sensitivity to the issue and to international demands. The next Israeli government will have to demonstrate the ability to maneuver in the face of pressures from the international community on different issues stemming from the military operation in Gaza on the one hand, and the broader issue of advancing the political process in the Middle East, on the other.

In their visit to Jerusalem on January 18, 2009, the six European leaders (the Czech prime minister, as the rotating president of the European Union, the French president, the German chancellor, and the British, Italian, and Spanish prime ministers) refrained from discussing issues of proportionality, the use of certain types of weapons, and the targeting of international institutions in the Gaza Strip, but all of them stressed their desire to see progress in the political process.

The Czech prime minister, whose country is one of the friendliest towards Israel among the EU, said with regard to the Sharm el-Sheikh summit, which took place a few hours before the meeting with Prime Minister Olmert, that “the participants have, of course, called on all sides involved to renew the peace process as soon as possible. They agreed that the active role of the new American administration in the process is absolutely critical, and expressed the hope that the process would be a priority on the administration’s foreign policy agenda.” At the same meeting, the French president was quick to propose a summit that would deal with the question of “how a Palestinian state would exist in peace with the State of Israel.”²

The first signs from President Obama, including the phone conversations he had with Middle East leaders as soon as he assumed office, indicate that indeed the administration fully intends to give the political process high priority. The new president will have to wait until Israel chooses its new political leadership, and to an extent, also until the internal political picture on the Palestinian arena clears. However, those who assume that the new administration will flinch from dealing with the topic because of the need to handle the global financial crisis, address issues such as the war in Afghanistan, or plan the withdrawal of American forces from Iraq are making a mistake.

In considering how the United States should approach the Israeli-Palestinian and Israeli-Syrian conflicts, the new administration’s decision makers will have to face up to the weaknesses of the political systems in this region and the problems that surfaced and were exacerbated during Operation Cast Lead. For example, Israel, the Palestinian Authority, and the international actors involved in the Israeli-Palestinian political process may well compare the Gaza Strip with the area controlled by the PA. In other words, the question is how to prevent the situation that prevailed in the Gaza Strip – i.e., the capability of various terrorist groups to produce and launch rockets, primitive as they may be – from replicating itself in the West Bank, and can Israel accept Palestinian and/or international substitutes for its own monitoring and preventive activity.

The Gaza operation aggravated the relations between Hamas and Fatah, and it will further reduce the ability of Abu Mazen (or his successor) to conduct effective negotiations with the Israeli government

over the core issues. UN Security Council Resolution 1860 does not refer to Hamas at all, but the reconstruction efforts in Gaza will require some dialogue with the “government” there, while the drive to strengthen the ceasefire regimen has propelled some European Community members to consider easing the minimal conditions for dialogue with Hamas. A possible outcome of such a move might be the further undermining of Abu Mazen’s standing. The operation also brought into sharper relief the relations between the moderate Arab regimes and Iran. It is not hard to guess to whom President Mubarak was referring in his speech at the Kuwait conference on January 19, 2009, when he said that one must not allow external forces to use the tragedy of the Palestinians in order to invade the Arab world.³ One must not assume that Iran will abandon its Hamas satellite and not assist in its economic, military, and political rehabilitation.

An additional question confronting the new administration in Washington, especially if it decides to become closely involved in the negotiations between Israel and Syria, is its relations with Turkey. During the course of the operation, Turkish leaders adopted a very blunt and critical tone towards Israel. This may have been anger created over the fact that the Israeli prime minister, who visited Ankara just days prior to the beginning of the operation, did not so much as hint to his Turkish counterpart that Israel intended to attack Gaza, and over the fact that Turkey, in its attempts to broker a ceasefire, was pushed from the center of the political stage and forced to watch Egypt reap most of the political rewards. Turkey’s expected demotion as the primary political broker in the Syrian-Israeli track might bring about an additional deterioration in Ankara-Jerusalem relations. The new Israeli government will have to invest significant efforts in damage control, both with regard to the Turkish government and with Jordan, where every round of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is cause for near-existential fears. If the assessment is correct that the head of Jordan’s general intelligence services was recently removed from his post for attempting to improve the relations with Hamas abroad, this is further evidence of Jordan’s own internal struggle with the issue.⁴

In his speech at the Kuwait conference, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia said, “Israel must understand that the choice between war and peace will not remain open forever, and that the Arab peace initiative

currently on the table will not remain there forever.”⁵ UN Security Council Resolution 1860 of January 8, 2009 regarding the events in Gaza refers to the importance of the Arab peace initiative in its call to renew efforts to achieve peace.⁶ Before deciding to restart negotiations under its own auspices, the new administration will also have to consider the possible inclusion of the Arab initiative in the limited platform of the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. The moderate Arab states, and Egypt in particular, made a public showing of their willingness to confront Iran and its satellites. It may be assumed that in exchange they will demand greater American support for their initiative.

These are merely some of the political questions arising out of Operation Cast Lead. The issues are sensitive and touch on complex interrelations that also exist between the main players (or those who view themselves as such) dedicated to solving the Arab-Israeli conflict on the political level. The new Israeli government will need maneuvering skills and sophistication in order to cope with immediate issues emerging from the operation and with questions having deep implications for Israel’s security and international standing. The change in the American administration, the change in the stances of certain nations in the Middle East, the political ambitions of the EU and some of its members – these will require Israel to enlist all of its political capabilities. Another round such as Operation Cast Lead in the shadow of Iranian nuclear capability is a challenge Israel has never faced. This will have to be discussed again as Iran’s efforts bring it closer to attaining such capability.

Notes

- 1 At the Arab summit meeting in Kuwait on January 19-20, 2009, the Saudi Arabian king stated: “In all honesty, I must say to my Palestinian brothers that their internal conflict is a greater threat to their struggle than the Israeli incursion.”
- 2 A telegram from the Foreign Ministry to its embassies dated January 18, 2009.
- 3 Egyptian State Information Service, January 19, 2009.
- 4 *Jerusalem Post*, December 30, 2008.
- 5 *Arab News*, January 20, 2009.
- 6 S / Res / 1860 (2009), (Section 8).