

# Ramifications of the Gaza Campaign for Local Terrorist Organizations

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Operation Cast Lead, which lasted three weeks, dealt a heavy blow to Hamas' governing institutions in Gaza and its security and military mechanisms, and seems to have hurt other terrorist groups active in Gaza as well, such as Islamic Jihad and global jihad organizations. At this stage, it is impossible to assess fully the scope of the blow these organizations sustained and the impact it had on their future ability to operate. However, the main objective of the operation was clearly to affect Hamas' future conduct, and, based on initial assessments by Israeli security sources, it appears that Hamas sustained a heavy blow to its infrastructure and fighting capability. According to these assessments, most of the tunnels used to smuggle arms, equipment, and personnel were destroyed, and about 700 Hamas fighters were killed and many others wounded.<sup>1</sup> Hamas' weapons production capabilities and long range rocket reserves were also damaged.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, it seems that Hamas retained its ability to continue firing Qassam rockets towards populated Israeli areas near Gaza and to launch Grad missiles towards population centers farther away. It also seems that the other organizations have similar capabilities, though smaller in scope. These organizations' future decision whether to continue firing rockets at Israel will be greatly affected by their assessment of Israel's likely response and by other considerations – intra-Palestinian, inter-organizational, and external factors.

Israel's mode of fighting during the operation revealed to these organizations that preparations against Israeli superiority in the air, at sea, and on land did not allow them to realize their original plans

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and cause severe harm to Israeli soldiers and the Israeli rear. Their attacks against IDF fighting units and the number of IDF casualties were significantly lower than what was anticipated by Israeli security sources and certainly lower than Hamas' stated expectations before the fighting erupted. The extent of the damage among Israeli civilians, despite the launch of some 640 rockets and some 224 mortar bombs towards Israel, some of which landed in cities in the southern part of the country such as Beer Sheva, Ashkelon, and Ashdod, was relatively low; the damage was mostly to property and in the disruption of the routine in these cities. Their effect on Israeli decision making and on the morale of the Israeli public was minimal or less.

The public victory declarations by Hamas leaders presumably do not prevent their understanding the organization's need to prepare for the next campaign in a way that will help it extract from Israel a much steeper and more painful price than it did this time, in light of the IDF's clear military advantage, which is unlikely to change in the near future. Thus it seems that the organization will have to adjust its combat strategy and operational methods and equip itself with the appropriate arms that will allow it to render more effective blows against the IDF and enlarge the range and power of its capacity to harm Israel's cities.

In light of the Hamas leadership's concern that it will be challenged for sole control of the Gaza Strip, one may expect that in the short term, the organization will act to restore its civilian and security control of the Strip as soon as possible, along with rebuilding the military power that was heavily damaged. Already in the first days after the ceasefire went into effect, the organization announced it had deployed police in the streets of Gaza and that the smuggling of arms and fighters from Sinai into Gaza through the Rafah tunnels had resumed, taking advantage of the interim period until effective Egyptian activity gets underway to prevent smuggling on the basis of understandings with Israel.<sup>3</sup>

Because Hamas views the preservation and development of its military capability as its central tool in its struggle against Israel and in its confrontation with the Palestinian Authority, it would seem that its future military priorities are expected to include:

- a. Reorganizing its manpower in fighting units and appointing new commanders to replace those killed or wounded.

- b. Rebuilding the military units by recruiting new volunteers from among the Gaza population.
- c. Purchasing large quantities of equipment and arms, especially of improved quality (e.g., having greater firing range so as to reach central Israel and beyond); they will attempt to smuggle these into Gaza in every conceivable manner.
- d. Tightening cooperation with Iran, Hizbollah, and Syria to obtain financing, training, and equipment to replace what was lost.
- e. Attempting through terrorism to extort from Israel a cost in casualties, primarily via activists in the West Bank, in order to redress its sense of the intolerable gap between the huge number of Palestinian casualties and the few Israeli casualties, though doing so carefully in order not to lead Israel to a massive response against Hamas in Gaza.

For Islamic Jihad, whose power base and main interest lie only in carrying out armed attacks, the lessons of the campaign are not expected to change the strategy of the struggle guiding its actions. It is possible that its operatives will learn tactical lessons regarding preferred methods and operational arenas against Israel. In light of the common interests of the organization and its patron, Iran, and Iran's protégé, Hizbollah, to undermine the post-campaign intensified diplomatic efforts to generate an extended period of calm and the renewal of political negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians, Islamic Jihad will likely attempt to renew at the earliest possible opportunity revenge attacks in the Gaza Strip (as much as it is capable of, and until a ceasefire that will limit it is finalized) and particularly in the West Bank, where its main infrastructure is concentrated. The organization will undoubtedly try to renew its attempts to harm Israel proper, and it is even possible that it will try to extend its activity to other arenas, such as Lebanon, Sinai, or – though only to the extent that Iran will approve and assist – carrying out revenge attacks abroad.

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Global jihadists and al-Qaeda leaders who criticized Hamas' political path and viewed it as doomed to failure will try to capitalize on the difficulties imposed on the Gaza population by the campaign, and intensify their efforts to recruit new volunteers into their ranks. It may be that one of the lessons learned by global jihadists in the Gaza Strip will be expressed by an attempt to strengthen their ties with their affiliates outside of Gaza, and perhaps even with al-Qaeda itself, ties that so far were tenuous at most. Al-Qaeda, which for a long time has been trying to build a base of operations against Israel within its borders – and therefore in part tried to expand its influence in the Gaza Strip – is waiting for a change in policy on the part of Hamas, which until now has prevented al-Qaeda from establishing a base in the Strip and acting freely via its supporters against Israel. Such a change is not likely to occur as yet, and global jihadists will have to suffice themselves with using the interim period until the ceasefire arrangements stabilize in the south to harm Israel through terrorist attacks (as in the January 27, 2009 incident in which one soldier was killed and three wounded) or by sporadic fire from the Gaza Strip, and at a later date, by expanding its activity as much as possible to Sinai, the West Bank, or inside Israel itself, using locals or by bringing in activists from abroad.

Thus while insufficient time has passed in order to make a comprehensive assessment of the effect of the campaign on the anticipated conduct against Israel by the terrorist organizations in Gaza, it is clear that despite the blows they absorbed, all the organizations will act at the earliest possible opportunity to rebuild the military strength that was damaged, in order to prove that their ability to

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continue harassing and hurting Israel remains considerable. The gap in losses between the sides is expected to motivate them to try to carry out mass-casualty attacks, including suicide attacks, whose prevention depends primarily on Israel's ability to foil them. The renewal of ongoing fire from Gaza beyond the transition period until ceasefire arrangements in the south are stabilized depends to a large extent on what Hamas can

achieve through Egyptian mediation, particularly opening of the border crossings, and its assessment of the punishment the Gaza population

and Hamas itself can expect should it or the other organizations in Gaza again disrupt the calm on Israel's southern border. Therefore, Israel's responses and the measure of its determination to prevent in practical terms a return to the situation that prevailed on the southern border before the operation, along with help from Egypt and international elements to prevent massive rearming and renewal of fire from Gaza, will have a decisive weight in shaping the picture on Israel's southern border in the immediate years to come. Continued terrorist activity on the part of Palestinian organizations against Israel on the other fronts is a reality that only a comprehensive political settlement may perhaps change, certainly not one limited military operation in Gaza.

## Notes

- 1 [http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2009/01/22/world/main4746224.shtml?source=RSSattr=World\\_4746224](http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2009/01/22/world/main4746224.shtml?source=RSSattr=World_4746224).
- 2 <http://www.globes.co.il/news/article.aspx?did=1000412293>.  
[http://dover.idf.il/IDF/News\\_Channels/art\\_mivzaim/09/01/2001.htm](http://dover.idf.il/IDF/News_Channels/art_mivzaim/09/01/2001.htm).
- 3 "Smuggling into Gaza Renewed through Rafiah Tunnels," Anshel Pfeffer and Barak Ravid, *Haaretz*, January 22, 2009.