

Operation Protective Edge: Strategic and Tactical Asymmetry

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The war in numbers: 50 days of fighting; 4,258 rockets fired at Israel; 735 Iron Dome interceptions; 5,226 air strikes; 32 tunnels destroyed; 74 dead on the Israeli side; and some 2,200 dead on the Palestinian side.

Asymmetry in the Strategic Purpose

Operation Protective Edge is yet another example of an asymmetrical confrontation, not only in terms of the use of power but also in terms of the respective strategic purposes of both sides in the campaign. For Israel, it was another round of fighting in a series of rounds of fighting with terrorist organizations, and the main goal was to ensure a long period of calm and defer the next round for as long as possible, primarily by deterring Hamas through demonstration of the steep price it would have to pay for attacking Israel and also by weakening it militarily. Israel's overall strategy vis-à-vis Hamas has not changed since Hamas took over Gaza, which focused on weakening Hamas to the point where the Palestinian Authority would be able to regain control of the Gaza Strip. In the short term, Israel's policy was to avoid collapsing the Hamas government, while concurrently continuing to hold Hamas responsible for events in the Gaza Strip without recognizing the legitimacy of its government. The Israeli government, which preferred in its strategic objective to preserve the status quo of "calm for calm," lacked a political goal or an attempt to create new political options or horizons.

Unlike Israel, Hamas was fighting for its very survival. Before the operation, it was substantially weakened, besieged on every side, on its way to total isolation and bankruptcy, and rightly fearing the potential loss of its ability to govern the Gaza Strip. With nothing to lose, Hamas chose escalation and

rocket launches at Israel, as the only option left to it was to upset the situation in the effort to restore its relevance and ensure its future hold on the Gaza Strip, as well as create a platform for a future takeover of the West Bank.

One feature of asymmetrical confrontations is the need to change the strategic objective in light of the change in the conditions that brought about the fighting in the first place and in light of information emerging before and during the fighting. In this case, Israel was called on to change its operational rationale during Protective Edge, namely, a campaign to deter Hamas. The second stage was marked by focused action to remove the threat posed by the tunnels penetrating Israel (resulting from the surprise that was caused by not appreciating the tunnels' significance as a strategic threat). The third phase, which focused on strengthening long term protection, prompted Israel to exhibit the willingness to transition to a campaign of attrition in order to enforce the conditions for the end state. At the beginning of the operation it seems that Israel went into the conflict using the rationale of Operation Pillar of Defense – that of a time-limited operation to restore deterrence – and failed to understand the rationale of Hamas, an organization fighting for its survival, prepared for an extended confrontation until attainment of an achievement that it could present as justification for its continued rule, and betting it could impose its conditions for a ceasefire on Israel and Egypt. It was only after it became clear to Hamas that Israel, with Egypt's backing, was determined to engage in an extended war of attrition – without making any concession on the policy of first-ceasefire-then-discussion-of-terms principle – and while demonstrating power, improved defensive capabilities, stamina, and both domestic and international legitimacy, that Hamas understood that continuing the fighting was contrary to its own vital interests.

The long period of fighting was also the result of the Israeli government's message that it was not interested in toppling Hamas' rule of the Gaza Strip, as it was concerned about the ramifications of being mired in long term control of the Gaza Strip, the chaos that would ensue, and the possibility that even more extremist jihadists would fill the vacuum left by Hamas. Israel accepted the ceasefire proposal while communicating that it was looking for a rapid end to the fighting. This led Hamas to conclude that Israel was not prepared to fight over the long haul or make a drastic change in the strategic reality, and therefore it had the tools to manage the campaign on its own terms.

Did Israel Win?

In asymmetrical conflicts against non-state entities it is virtually impossible to attain a decisive outcome that denies the enemy the desire and ability to continue fighting. In confrontations of this type, the strategic objective is a victory determined by three parameters:

- a. *Meeting the objectives defined by the political echelon:* The IDF did in fact achieve the objectives determined by the political echelon. It inflicted severe damage on Hamas, weakened it, deterred it, reined it in, and used it to contain other terrorist organizations active in the Gaza Strip. However, these are limited objectives that do nothing to change the strategic situation. Furthermore, it is still not clear if deterrence for the long term has been achieved.
- b. *Forcing a ceasefire and a negotiated settlement on one's own terms:* This objective was also attained. The ceasefire conditions do not allow Hamas to attain any strategic goal for which it fought; Hamas failed to force Israel to agree to widespread opening of the border crossings before the start of the ceasefire and the construction of a naval port and airport later on. In addition, it was made clear that any future arrangement would be contingent on returning the PA to the Gaza Strip.
- c. *A decision in tactical-operational encounters:* The IDF met this objective as well.

On the other hand, Hamas also claims to have won the campaign. Its greatest achievement is having proven that there is no military resolution to the Palestinian problem. It fought the strongest army in the Middle East, which failed to destroy it; it fired rockets continuously deep into Israel's populated center; it inflicted heavy losses on the IDF; it prompted the evacuation of the civilians of the Gaza vicinity communities; and finally, in practice, it established mutual deterrence. For now, that is the dominant narrative among the Palestinians, both in Gaza and the West Bank.

Aspects of Asymmetry

In an era of rapid, significant changes in asymmetrical confrontations, it is doubtful there are fixed principles of warfare. Success in asymmetrical confrontations is to a large extent a contest of the ability to learn and adapt rapidly and creatively to developing circumstances. It seems that Hamas did a better job than Israel in learning the lessons of the previous rounds of

fighting and also proved capable in the course of the fighting of adaptation in the following areas:

- a. Seizing the initiative and being proactive, thereby snatching the surprise factor away from Israel (in contrast to the Israeli surprise during Operation Cast Lead, which caused heavy damage to Hamas forces and long range rockets, and during Operation Pillar of Defense, which opened with the targeted assassination of Hamas' Chief of Staff Ahmad Jabari and the neutralization of the threat of long range rockets). In Operation Protective Edge, Hamas found itself in the midst of a campaign after a series of escalating events, whereupon the military wing decided to surprise Israel and preemptively use its strategic abilities and fire long range rockets into Israel's center and stage attacks within Israel via the tunnels and from the sea. At the same time, the military wing prepared itself for extended fighting with Israel on the basis of redundant capabilities and defensive and logistical systems in fortified underground bunkers and tunnels. Hamas' political and military leaders went underground but managed to maintain continuity of command and control of their forces.
- b. Thanks to smuggling and local manufacturing, Hamas constructed a large ORBAT of well hidden rockets with various ranges, with emphasis on extended operative ranges to inflict damage on Israel's large population centers, albeit at the expense of accuracy and power of impact. This allowed Hamas to fire rockets continuously throughout the fighting with very few bottlenecks. Launch sites were set up in the heart of urban areas, usually next to sites that Hamas presumed Israel would view as off limits, with launchers hidden and camouflaged. The rocket salvos on different Israeli targets – though met with noted lack of success – were meant to penetrate the air defense protective layer provided by the Iron Dome system and disrupt the routine of the Israeli population throughout the fighting.
- c. Hamas prepared the infrastructure of attack tunnels reaching into Israeli territory for the sake of carrying out acts of mass murder and abductions of civilians and soldiers, and setting up ambushes for Israel's security forces. In addition, tunnels were used to protect and transport fighters and arms within the Gaza Strip in a way that left them impervious to identification and attack from the air. Tunnels were also a way to surprise the IDF's ground forces should they enter the Gaza Strip by setting off

explosives, ambushing tanks with anti-tank missiles, and abducting soldiers within Gaza.

- d. Hamas constructed hidden command and control capabilities, allowing it continuous function throughout the fighting and adherence to its original operational plans.
- e. In addition to its rocket capabilities, Hamas also constructed short range mortar shell capabilities. Once it understood that the long range rockets were being successfully intercepted, it concentrated efforts on its well calibrated mortar shells fired at the settlements adjacent to the Gaza Strip and the IDF deployment areas. Hamas used the fact that families evacuated these settlements to shape an image of victory and claim it had caused mass flight from the region.
- f. With the understanding that it was not able to cause significant damage at long ranges, Hamas tried to focus its efforts on strategic targets, such as Ben Gurion International Airport and, to a lesser extent, the Nuclear Research Reactor in Dimona, but with limited achievements.

Unlike Hamas, the IDF focused on constructing improved active defenses – early warning and interceptions – and performed well with the Iron Dome system, incorporating enhanced defenses for civilians and forces operating in the Gaza Strip. In terms of intelligence gathering, a multilayered intelligence infrastructure was in place, allowing ongoing efforts to attack Hamas targets and those of other terrorist organizations while reducing collateral damage and improving warnings to non-combatants and removing them from the areas under fire. In terms of tactics, the IDF lagged behind Hamas in learning and creativity. Although the IDF is a technological army, it did not create operational surprises and, careful to avoid harming non-combatants, took too much time to implement its targeted killing operations against the Hamas supreme commanders to attain a crushing effect. It seems that Israeli intelligence sources had not focused on building an accurate “genetic” profile of Hamas in fighting and understanding its essential makeup – social, ethical, anthropological, and traditional – in order to identify and destabilize Hamas’ centers of gravity, for the sake of both waging a successful campaign and subsequently conducting negotiations. An example of confronting centers of gravity was the damage inflicted on the high rise buildings in Gaza City during the last week of the confrontation, an action that had a significant effect because of the damage to the Gazan elites supporting Hamas.

When entering violent asymmetrical conflicts it is very important to gain legitimacy for the use of force in three circles: domestic, regional, and international. This legitimacy is based on the understanding that there is no choice but to employ military force by virtue of the right to self-defense against repeated terrorist attacks. Israel succeeded in persuading all three circles that the confrontation was forced on it by Hamas. Still, the longer the campaign lasted, the more pictures of wounded and dead civilians in the Gaza Strip accumulated, thus eroding international legitimacy – even though no international resolutions to stop the fighting were forced on Israel.

In terms of public consciousness, Hamas acted with duality. On the one hand, it invested much in the ability to fire rockets continuously and in propaganda designed to create the image of victory and battlefield successes. On the other hand, Hamas also stressed the heavy damage Israel was inflicting on Palestinian civilians in order to strengthen their image as victims, undermine Israel's international legitimacy, and prompt escalation in other arenas, such as the West Bank and among Israel's Arab citizens. Hamas failed in triggering escalation in other arenas and creating international pressure on Israel. In an asymmetrical war, the weaker side – i.e., Hamas – must also convince its public of the justness of its objectives and be able to present successes. Therefore Hamas conditioned its consent to a ceasefire on determining the principles of post-war arrangements, in order to present concrete gains to Gaza's residents. In these senses, Hamas' success is debatable.

One of the goals of a state fighting a non-state player is to drive a wedge between the organization and the population among which it hides and from which it operates. Gazan public opinion toward Hamas before the fighting was negative. The public was impatient with the dire straits created by Hamas in its more than eight years at the helm, a rule that was characterized by brutality, failures, and corruption. Even so, Israel could not create the necessary rupture because of the inevitable widespread harm to non-combatants and civilian and private infrastructures; in fact, it increased the Palestinian public's support for Hamas' path of resistance. This familiar pattern, which was bolstered by the notion that Israel only understands the language of force, should be reexamined. Israel used public opinion operations against Hamas to a limited extent and tried to maximize Hamas' status as a semi-state player responsible for any hostile activity from Gaza with which it is possible to conduct a dialogue of messages and firepower, unlike other

radical jihadist organizations looking only for means of self-sacrifice in order to kill as many heretics as possible.

To a certain extent, one can classify a confrontation of this type as a war by proxies. Despite the political divide between Iran and Hamas, the conduct of Hamas and global jihad in the confrontation in Gaza still bore the recognizable fingerprints of Iran in the supply of weapons, the transfer of know-how in rocket manufacturing capabilities and the underground sphere of warfare, and the training of operatives. Furthermore, Turkey and Qatar supported Hamas with money and political backing.

Conclusion and Future Implications

After almost four years in which Israel adopted a “sit and wait” policy without taking part in the battle to shape the future Middle East, and contrary to its desire to move away from the negative regional trends, events have spilled over into Israel. The events in Gaza and the Golan Heights are proof that center stage has been grabbed by elements with one shared characteristic: they are not states but rather intentionally undefined entities that have found terrorism and asymmetrical fighting to be readily available and immensely effective tools of warfare capable of – if not toppling states in the region – at least shattering the regional order and spreading instability through the regional and international systems.

Hamas constructed its force over the course of many years. It learned from the experience accrued in previous rounds of fighting and thoroughly prepared itself for this campaign, succeeding in surprising Israel with its ORBAT and the range of its rockets, the scope of the threat of the attack tunnels, and the penetrating moves of forces. It is clear that Hamas as well as other rogue elements, especially Hizbollah, will study Israel’s capabilities and the IDF’s strengths and weaknesses, and will try to prepare operational surprises for the next campaign.

The conventional wars Israel waged against the Arab armies earned Israel two major achievements: first, acceptance of the existence of the State of Israel in the heart of the Arab Muslim world of the Middle East, and second, peace accords with Egypt and Jordan and a political process with the Palestinians. In asymmetrical confrontations, in which a regular army – in this case, the IDF – fights terrorist cells using guerrilla tactics, is it even possible to achieve a military victory that in turn will effect a strategic paradigm shift with long term ramifications? Given that the Israeli

government did not define any strategic political objective for the campaign in Gaza, it also failed to reap the most from the conditions that came into being for formulating a better strategic reality for Israel's regional future. For years, Israel has tried to decouple the link between the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the greater issues in the Middle East. The confrontation in the Gaza Strip made manifest a new situation in which the leading Arab nations – Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan – did not embrace Hamas' side, and even expected Israel to strike a serious blow against it, further weakening Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood, its parent body. Because of the narrowness of its strategic vision, the Israeli government failed to take full advantage of a golden opportunity to establish broad regional cooperation against terrorists and non-state jihadist players, simply out of both fear that this would lead it back to the negotiating table with PA President Abbas and unwillingness to provide the Arab world with some recompense in the form of a declaration that Israel views the Arab Peace Initiative as a basis for talks and cooperation between Israel and the Arab world.