

# Operation Cast Lead: Political Dimensions and Public Opinion

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The government of Israel decided to embark upon Operation Cast Lead six weeks before the general Knesset elections. According to security sources in Israel, this is one of the reasons Hamas was surprised by the operation: Hamas did not expect Israel to embark on a military operation – certainly not one of such scope – before the elections and the formation of a new Israeli government. Indeed, this assessment was not unique to Hamas. In the days leading up to Operation Cast Lead, many analysts in Israel said that Israel was – in practice, if not in theory – in a time-out of sorts, and that it was highly unlikely that a transition government would undertake a substantial political or security initiative in the midst of an election campaign.

The willingness of the government, especially its two main parties – both at the time vying with Likud to form the next government – to make such a decision at such a time has a clear political aspect. Above all, it reflects the ability of the Israeli leadership to make decisions even under difficult circumstances. There were many, especially abroad, who wondered whether embarking on the operation at this time was not in fact connected to the elections, i.e., a function of the leaders' desire to attain strong achievements and tally up points before the voters went to the polls. This claim was made publicly by Hamas leaders and spokespeople, as well as other parties hostile to Israel.

A more critical analysis, however, leads in fact to the opposite conclusion, i.e., the timing was not chosen *because* of the imminent elections but rather *despite* them. One may safely assume that Israel's leaders understood that it is very hard to assess the electoral effect of

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such a military operation ahead of time – indeed, its effect is still far from clear and may well turn to the unexpected. The political risks of such an operation – like any military undertaking – are substantial. From the outset, the campaign’s objectives were limited and were not meant to satisfy all of the public’s wishes (e.g., a clear decision against Hamas or the collapse of its government in Gaza); the military achievements and especially the political ones were by no means a foregone conclusion; there is always the risk of a high number of casualties among both soldiers and civilians (casualties have a strong impact on public opinion); and there is also always the risk of unforeseen complications. Added to all this is the basic critical and suspicious nature of the Israeli public and the fickleness of public opinion. While before the operation there was tremendous pressure on the government to act and it seemingly had little choice in the matter, the government has already proven that when it wants to, it can withstand such pressure. Accordingly, embarking on the operation one and a half months before the elections demonstrates the readiness of the country’s leadership to take political risks and its ability to make difficult decisions. This on its own carries a message of deterrence.

From its first day, Operation Cast Lead enjoyed massive support among Israel’s Jewish population. The public saw and continues to see Operation Cast Lead as a just war in a double sense: there was full justification for going to war (the war was seen by all segments of the Jewish population as a war of “no choice”), and the way it was conducted and its use of force were justified. A poll taken the day after the start of the operation<sup>1</sup> showed 81 percent of the Israeli public supporting the operation, with only 12 percent opposed. In light of what we know today about the profound differences of opinion among the Jewish and Arab populations on Operation Cast Lead, it is apparent that the vast majority of those opposed were Israeli Arabs and that the scope of Jewish support for the operation reached 90 percent.

Unlike the Second Lebanon War, when support for the war and for the political and military leaderships eroded the longer the war continued, support for Operation Cast Lead remained steady throughout and even after its conclusion. However, the increase in political support for the two main parties in the government conducting the operation that was evident in the early days of the operation quickly evaporated.

As for support for the operation, the data is unequivocal. In a poll from the fifth day of the war (December 31, 2008), in a statistically representative sample of the Jewish population,<sup>2</sup> 79 percent the population “strongly supported” the operation and 14 percent “largely supported” it. A poll held on the third day of the ground offensive (January 6, 2009)<sup>3</sup> showed that 70 percent of the Israeli population felt it was necessary to continue the operation, compared to 20 percent that said it was time for a ceasefire. Here too, one may assume that some 80 percent of the Jewish population supported the continuation of the operation. These results are fairly similar to those collected before the ground offensive. In a poll taken on December 30, 2008,<sup>4</sup> 81 percent of the total population (equivalent to about 90 percent of the Jewish population) supported the continuation of the operation, compared to 10 percent that favored a ceasefire. A poll taken at the end of the second week of the operation (January 8, 2009)<sup>5</sup> showed that 91 percent of the Jewish population expressed support for the operation and only 4 percent opposed it.

This picture of absolute support within the Jewish population for the operation was repeated almost exactly in the data collected by the War and Peace Index of the Tami Steinmetz Center. In a poll taken January 4-6, 2009,<sup>6</sup> 94 percent of the Jewish population responded that they strongly supported the operation; 92 percent thought it had security benefits for Israel; 92 percent justified the air force strikes on Gaza; and 70 percent felt that sending ground troops into Gaza was “a necessary step.” The poll charted a reverse picture among Israeli Arabs: 85 percent opposed the operation.

The more the operation progressed, the more some segments of the population started to feel that the operation had realized its potential. Still, the large majority supported its continuation. A poll taken on January 13, 2009<sup>7</sup> showed that 62 percent of the Israeli public (equivalent to some 70 percent of the Jewish population) responded that the operation ought to be continued, compared with 26 percent of the public that supported the ceasefire.

There was also a consensus in the Israeli public regarding the outcome of the operation. A poll taken on January 13, 2009<sup>8</sup> – just four days before the ceasefire – showed that 78 percent of the Israeli public felt that “the operation in Gaza was a success,” compared to only 9

percent that defined it “a failure” (13 percent responded “don’t know”). Eighty-two percent responded negatively to the question “Did Israel exert unnecessary force?” compared with 13 percent that responded in the affirmative. Presumably within the Jewish population only a small percentage answered yes. In a poll taken around the same time,<sup>9</sup> 82 percent of respondents graded the military activity “very good” and another 12 percent graded it “good”; 25 percent graded the political activity as “very good” with another 35 percent grading it “good”; and performance on the home front received grades of “very good” (58 percent) or “good” (28 percent). Clearly the Israeli public saw Operation Cast Lead as both a just and a successful war.

The end of the operation did not meet the expectations of a significant portion of the public, despite the fact that the leadership deliberately did not create unrealistic expectations (a clear lesson from the 2006 war). Nonetheless, the situation was much more favorable than it was at the end of the Second Lebanon War. Then, the attitude of the public to UN Security Council Resolution 1701 (which formulated the ceasefire) was overwhelmingly negative, whereas in a poll taken the day after the Cast Lead ceasefire began,<sup>10</sup> 36 percent said they were in favor of the ceasefire versus 50 percent who were opposed, with 14 percent responding “don’t know.” Polls published about one week after the start of the ceasefire (and several days of complete quiet on the front) already showed a more positive picture. In one,<sup>11</sup> those interviewed were asked: “Should the operation have been halted or should the entire Gaza Strip have been conquered?” Forty-eight percent responded “conquer all of the Gaza Strip,” versus 44 percent who responded “halt the operation.” In another poll,<sup>12</sup> 58 percent of respondents answered that “the decision of the Israeli leadership to enter a ceasefire and not continue the fighting in Gaza was the right decision” versus only 38 percent who responded that it was “the wrong decision.” The final public opinion verdict will likely depend on the situation that prevails in the south. Continuing violations of the total calm, as occurred in the last days of January and the first days of February, will make themselves felt very clearly in terms of Israeli public opinion.

Implications of the war for the elections were more complex. On the one hand, the popularity of the triumvirate leading the war rose as long as the operation progressed, though the change was particularly

dramatic with regard to the minister of defense. Just a few days after the end of the operation, a decisive majority of the public ranked highly each of the three as well as the IDF chief of staff and the opposition leader for their conduct during the operation.<sup>13</sup> Even so, the change was not translated into election results, which was also reflected by the polls. A poll taken the day after the start of the operation<sup>14</sup> indicated, for the first time, a change in the ratio between the blocs and an advantage for the center-left bloc (63 Knesset seats) over the right-religious bloc (57), as opposed to 66 seats to the right-religious bloc and 54 seats to the center-left bloc in a poll published<sup>15</sup> on December 23, 2008 (a few days before the start of the operation).

And yet, already by the fourth day of the operation, the lead returned to the right-religious bloc, and since then it only increased. On January 18, 2009, one day after the start of the ceasefire, the advantage of the right-religious bloc returned to its pre-operation proportions – 65 versus 55 seats.<sup>16</sup> The major erosion was in support for Kadima, which went from a high of 28-29 seats during the first days of the operation to a low of 21-25 seats by the end of January. One poll published towards the end of January even showed a 70 to 50 advantage to the right-religious bloc.<sup>17</sup>

It is difficult to account for this phenomenon with any certainty. Perhaps the final results of the operation did not match the expectations among the public, or perhaps the public did not fully appreciate the performance of the Minister of Foreign Affairs during the war – or a combination of the two. It may also be that the war brought out patriotism, hawkishness, and anti-Arab sentiment, which generally serve rightist parties (this may also explain the rise in the strength of Lieberman's Israel Beteinu party). Kadima's loss of popularity and the strengthening of the right-religious bloc proved, however, a passing phenomenon.

An additional question addresses the large difference between the Israeli public's attitude towards Operation Cast Lead and its attitude to the Second Lebanon War, considering the fact that the current operation also did not achieve a clear decision in Israel's favor: Hamas, much like Hizbollah, was not vanquished and did not collapse. The question is if this is linked to the particular characteristics of this operation – the low number of casualties, both among soldiers and civilians, the

positive image of how the military performed, particularly the ground forces, and the efficient and organized handling of the civilian front – or whether this represents a coming of age and a certain sobriety among the Israeli public regarding the nature of war against terrorist and sub-state organizations. The first is the more likely answer, and some of the data clearly points in that direction. At the same time, one must not discount the possibility that the second supposition is something of a factor as well.

### Notes

- 1 "Maagar Mohot," broadcast on Israel TV's Channel 10 on Sunday, December 28, 2008.
- 2 "TeleSeker," published in *Maariv*, January 2, 2009.
- 3 "Maagar Mohot," broadcast during the "Mishal Ham Show" on Israel TV's Channel 2 on January 6, 2009.
- 4 "Maagar Mohot," broadcast during the "Mishal Ham Show" on Israel TV's Channel 2 on December 30, 2008.
- 5 "TeleSeker," published in *Maariv*, January 9, 2009.
- 6 War and Peace Index, Tami Steinmetz Center for Peace Studies, January 11, 2009.
- 7 "Maagar Mohot," broadcast during the "Mishal Ham Show" on Israel TV's Channel 2 on January 13, 2009.
- 8 "Dialogue Poll," published in *Haaretz*, January 16, 2009.
- 9 "TeleSeker," published in *Maariv*, January 16, 2009.
- 10 "Maagar Mohot," broadcast on Israel TV's Channel 2 on January 18, 2009.
- 11 Poll taken by Mina Tzemah, published in *Yediot Ahronot*, January 23, 2009.
- 12 "TeleSeker," published in *Maariv*, January 23, 2009.
- 13 See notes 11 and 12.
- 14 See note 1.
- 15 "Maagar Mohot," broadcast during the "Mishal Ham Show" on Israel TV's Channel 2 on December 23, 2008.
- 16 "Maagar Mohot," broadcast on Israel TV's Channel 2 on January 18, 2009.
- 17 "Maagar Mohot," broadcast during the "Mishal Ham Show" on Israel TV's Channel 2 on January 28, 2009, and published in the newspaper *Ma'kor Rishon*, January 29, 2009.