Israeli Deterrence in the Aftermath of Protective Edge

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Like all of Israel's wars and military campaigns, Operation Protective Edge was fought because the deterrence Israel had hoped to establish by prior threats or actions broke down – a reality that only became clear *ex post facto*. And like the impact of other such operations, the contribution of Protective Edge to the rehabilitation of Israeli deterrence will also be known, if at all, only after it too has been exposed in retrospect to have been limited in time or scope. That does not mean that efforts to establish deterrence are futile and should not be pursued, only that it is difficult to determine with any certainty how effective they will be. The chances that deterrence strategies will succeed are maximized when they combine credible threats to inflict unacceptable costs if the adversary undertakes undesired actions with promises – either to it or others important to it – of benefits if it refrains from taking those actions.

Military deterrence has been at the center of Israel's security doctrine since its rudiments were elaborated by David Ben Gurion. Although the conceptualization of deterrence has flourished in the nuclear age, its essential principle has always been a feature of conflict management, and its most familiar and concise formulation comes from the fourth century Roman author Publius Flavius Vegetius: *Si vis pacem, para bellum* (If you wish peace, prepare for war). At its heart, military deterrence means dissuading an adversary from taking action unacceptable to the deterring side by credibly threatening unacceptable consequences if that action is nevertheless taken. The simplicity of the adage, however, belies its almost infinite complexity. In the late 1950s, Thomas Schelling, in many respects the "father" of modern deterrence theory, wrote that the concept remained vague and inelegant.

Continuous refinement and improvement since then have provided little more in the way of actionable guidance for decision makers.

That is because the variables that determine whether or not deterrence exists and will continue to exist in the future are difficult if not impossible to assess. These include the adversary's calculus of the costs and benefits of action and inaction (especially the definition of "unacceptable consequences" according to its own logic, not that of the deterrer), the extent to which it is a unitary, authoritative actor immune to misperception and miscalculation, and its understanding of the credibility of the threat, along with one's own willingness and ability to inflict the threatened consequences.

At first glance, Hamas' ideological commitment to the complete eradication of Israel implies that inaction against Israel contradicts its very raison d'être and that the only consequence that may outweigh the cost of inaction is a credible threat to its own existence. According to this logic, only such a threat can deter it from sustaining or renewing combat with Israel. Israel did not directly pose such a threat during Operation Protective Edge, because it was self-deterred (fear of casualties), deterred by others (fear of international criticism of the violence necessary to encompass that objective), or persuaded by its own analysis that the complete destruction of Hamas did not serve its broader interests. Consequently, Hamas should logically have continued the fighting until it exhausted any capacity to attack Israel. In fact, however, Hamas ultimately acceded to an unconditional ceasefire in late August without having achieved any of its stated objectives, that is, on virtually the same terms it had been offered seven weeks earlier.

One likely explanation for this is that, notwithstanding its subsequent declarations of victory, Hamas came to see continued fighting as a potential threat to its political primacy in Gaza, if not to its very existence. In other words, while Hamas may be implacable in its ideological hostility to Israel – and there is virtually nothing that Israel can do to induce Hamas to renounce that hostility – its ultimate objective may not be accorded the highest priority or immediacy at any given point in time. Faced with an inability to inflict significant damage on Israel, an indifferent if not hostile strategic hinterland (there were more anti-Israel demonstrations in London and Paris than in Arab capitals), and growing death and destruction among its Gaza constituency, the Hamas leadership apparently came to the conclusion that prolongation of the fighting would work to its disadvantage and that it was better to

wait (and hope) for a favorable change in the constellation of forces before resuming violent conflict.

It is, however, an open question whether or for how long Israel can prevent such a change. For one thing, Palestinian support for Hamas' worldview and narrative does not appear to have ebbed significantly in the short term. On the contrary, public opinion surveys immediately after the ceasefire show little inclination to blame Hamas for the damage inflicted on Gaza, growing endorsement of its approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, widespread acceptance of its claims that Israel deterrence had been undermined, and (by almost 80 percent of respondents) that the fighting had produced a Palestinian victory – a not altogether implausible interpretation of survival despite clear inferiority in the metrics of military power. All this suggests that Hamas did not pay an unacceptably high price for Operation Protective Edge – certainly not one high enough to threaten its control of Gaza and its competitiveness in the West Bank or one that would deter it from initiating another round. On the other hand, certain inconsistencies imply that its political calculus in this regard might be less reassuring. After all, even before the fighting ended, Hamas felt the need to carry out the public extra-judicial execution of dozens of those it charged were "collaborators" but were widely known to belong to Fatah and other opposition elements, *pour encourager les autres.* Nor can Hamas ignore the fact that its overall approval ratings are higher in the West Bank, where the consequences of its policy produced only pride and anger, than in Gaza, where it brought about death and destruction (and where it is riskier to express positions unsupportive of Hamas). Moreover, while 77.6 percent of Gaza respondents believed that Israel had been "painfully beaten by Palestinian militants," 72.5 percent were also worried about another military confrontation with Israel, suggesting that a new Hamas-initiated confrontation might be received with some lack of enthusiasm, particularly if some diplomatic movement or other change in conditions on the West Bank meanwhile enhances the relative standing of the Fatah-controlled Palestinian Authority.

In addition, Hamas' political capital will be influenced by a number of factors beyond Israel's exclusive control. That will be the case inside Gaza, particularly with respect to the arrangements concerning control of funds, jobs, and contracts for the economic reconstruction, as well as for any security (and other) presence of Fatah or third parties. The same will be true of the regional political-strategic environment. As long as Egypt continues

to be ruled by a regime unequivocally hostile to the Muslim Brotherhood, it will be difficult for Hamas to secure any significant political backing for an aggressive policy or to persuade Egypt to relax its determination to prevent Hamas from replenishing its depleted war stocks. And if radical Islamist movements continue to gain momentum, Hamas might feel more hesitant to act aggressively lest it further alienate those regional and international forces galvanized to resist that tide, for which Turkey and Qatar are no real substitute, though it could also be emboldened by the apparent tide of history. In any case, these are all matters over which Israel will have little influence.

Even issues that ostensibly are under Israel's control, particularly the threat and use of military force in order to influence the adversary's cost-benefit calculus, are nevertheless subject to serious constraints. Thus, international political considerations undermine the credibility of an Israeli threat to bring the full weight of its military power to bear on Gaza or to act as though it were in a full state of war with Gaza – meaning, inter alia, denial of food, fuel, water, energy, and other essentials. Lacking the overall ability to pursue decisive strategic victory over Hamas or the availability of mechanisms to lower Hamas' political motivation, hence, its "unacceptable consequences" threshold, Israel may be able to constrain the buildup of Hamas capabilities, but it will be hard put to deter Hamas directly for an indefinite period of time.

However, that reality does not necessarily preclude the possibility of "indirect deterrence," that is, the threat or use of force in a manner that erodes support for Hamas among the Palestinian public and other forces in the Palestinian political arena, whose "unacceptable consequences" threshold may well be crossed at some point short of Hamas' destruction. After all, not all Palestinians share Hamas' zeal for war against Israel, and even among those who do identify with Hamas' ultimate vision, not all share the intensity of its commitment or are willing to incur the same costs in pursuit of this vision. So if Hamas is persuaded that a renewal of violence will provoke objections and resistance among in its own constituency to the point where its standing is threatened, that may be a more effective deterrent than any direct – and intrinsically limited – Israeli threat or action aimed at it.

Promoting the constellation of forces needed for indirect deterrence may be pursued by military means alone, including threats and acts to constrain Hamas capabilities, and it almost certainly necessitates zero tolerance of any Hamas use, import, or manufacture of weapons and construction of tunnels. But a comprehensive approach that combines the threat and use of

force with political efforts to lower the motivation, hence, the "unacceptable consequences" threshold of non-Hamas Palestinians, promises to be more effective. That clearly implies the pledge of some benefit for withholding or withdrawing support from Hamas, both in terms of economic wellbeing for Gazans and of a political horizon for all Palestinians, in addition to the threat of incurring costs for failing to do so.

Yet the most sophisticated strategy may in fact not ensure deterrence, and even if Hamas refrains from taking actions unacceptable to Israel, it will be difficult to know at any given point in time whether that is because Hamas has been deterred or because of some other reason (e.g., distractions, different priorities, capability constraints). The same intrinsic ambiguity, by the way, characterizes Hizbollah's inactivity vis-à-vis Israel, including its rejection of urgent calls for assistance from Hamas during Operation Protective Edge: despite the assumption that the punishment inflicted by Israel in 2006 continues to deter Hizbollah directly or indirectly, there is no certainty that the explanation does not lie elsewhere or that Hizbollah will continue to refrain from acting against Israel in the future, especially in different circumstances, e.g., in the context of a clash between Israel and Iran.

Successful deterrence may possibly be inferred; only deterrence failures can clearly be demonstrated (though not necessarily understood correctly), and then, only in retrospect. That is not a reason to abandon deterrence as a core element of security policy. But it is a reason to search for a multi-faceted approach that addresses both motivations and capabilities and consciously tries to shape both components of the cost-benefit calculus and communicates them, not just to the adversary itself – in this case, Hamas – but also to all the other components of a political system that are important to it, namely, the entirety of the Palestinian body politic.