



INSS Insight No. 606, September 11, 2014

Dealing with Hamas' Military Force Reconstruction

Amos Yadlin

The political disagreement that began at the outset of the recent war against Hamas between those advocating deterring Hamas and those in favor of toppling Hamas is legitimate in a democratic country. With that, it is necessary to undertake a critical assessment of Hamas' expected force buildup after Operation Protective Edge before formulating a concrete, forward-looking policy. Indeed, now that the guns are silent, Hamas' efforts at force reconstruction must be addressed. The fact that there was no insistence on mechanisms to prevent force reconstruction at the end of the previous rounds of fighting – Operation Pillar of Defense in 2012 and Operation Cast Lead in 2009 – was, to a large extent, the original sin that allowed Hamas to touch off the most recent round of hostilities.

Earlier this week, a senior political source – apparently the Israeli Foreign Minister – was quoted as saying that “Hamas did not even wait one moment after the last round of fighting to start rearming itself in anticipation of the next round.” In response, a senior defense establishment source denied the claim, saying, “We have no such information and we have no idea on what this charge is based.”

However, no particular intelligence capabilities are necessary to determine that Hamas would start reconstructing its military capabilities immediately after the ceasefire. This is what Hamas has done in the past, and one must assume it will do so now. Hamas is an organization whose rallying cry is armed resistance; it is therefore obvious that it will, without any delay, make every effort to rebuild its military capabilities, badly damaged in the 50 days of Operation Protective Edge. In this latest round of fighting, Hamas lost both of its main strategic capabilities: the long range missile threat, which was destroyed by Israel's Iron Dome, and the offensive tunnels, almost all of which were destroyed by the IDF. Additional efforts, such as infiltrations from the sea and UAVs, either failed or were badly damaged.

Yet while Hamas accepted the ceasefire with virtually none of its many demands met, Israel, for its part, did not succeed in imposing on the terrorist organization one of the central demands presented by Prime Minister Netanyahu as an objective of the operation:

the demilitarization of Gaza and the establishment of mechanisms that would deny Hamas the ability to reconstruct its force. However, the latter goal, disregarded after previous rounds of fighting, must be central to Israel's demands in the negotiations on a long term arrangement, expected to begin in Cairo 30 days after the ceasefire began on August 26. Until an agreement is reached (and the chances it will deal effectively with force reconstruction are low), Hamas' interest is to employ thousands of rocket manufacturers and thousands of tunnel diggers, and place them at the top of its list of salaried employees.

It is important to understand that the damage to Hamas was massive but not total. Accordingly, focus must now be on three areas related to Hamas' future military force reconstruction: the smuggling tunnels (which Egypt has tackled), the manufacture of missiles and rockets, and the offensive tunnels.

1. The smuggling tunnels: Hamas had an estimated 800-1,000 smuggling tunnels. Egypt has destroyed most of them, but presumably several dozen have survived and Hamas will give preference to smuggling arms and money through them, as humanitarian aid, food, fuel, and even construction materials will in any case enter Gaza through Kerem Shalom under Israel's auspices.
2. Arms production: Presumably 30-50 percent of this capability survived Israel's attacks and has been reactivated at the highest possible rate, pending the availability of raw materials.
3. The offensive tunnels: Most of Hamas' digging operations are likely currently directed at retrieving bodies and identifying members of the military branch buried in the rubble. Still, the operating assumption must be that one or two offensive tunnels were not discovered or destroyed outright, and that Hamas will make every effort to make them operable. Even if they failed to fulfill their intended purpose, the publicity the offensive tunnels garnered and impact they had on people's imagination will drive Hamas to apply itself further to this means of terrorism. Even if much time passes before strategic capabilities can be dug, Hamas is interested in preserving and making use of the tunnels as a platform for carrying out pinpoint terrorist attacks. Such attacks would aim to be as deadly as possible and gain much media coverage, so as to puncture both the morale of the communities in the western Negev and the narrative of fortitude after Operation Protective Edge.

With this as background, what emerges is the following set of insights:

1. Hamas will make every effort to reconstruct its force and prepare for the next military round.
2. Hamas is not expected to be able to reconstruct its force massively any time soon. At this point Hamas is mostly concerned with damage assessment and rehabilitation. It is far from having the capabilities it had in early July 2014.

However, Hamas has in the past demonstrated impressive force reconstruction skills, and therefore there is cause for concern in this regard.

3. Hamas has shown itself to be a learning organization. It will study its successes and strengthen its capabilities that proved themselves; it will also analyze its failures, and look for new ways of attacking Israel.
4. There is no doubt that Hamas is pleased with its success in targeting civilians and soldiers with mortar fire and will reinforce this aspect of its capabilities.
5. Hamas' reconstruction efforts will be done covertly, hidden from Israeli intelligence. Presumably the Gaza civilian population will provide the defensive cover Hamas needs to do so.
6. Reconstruction will occur via external purchases and smuggling as well as via manufacturing within the Gaza Strip.
7. Placing Palestinian Authority government and security services in Gaza will not be enough to prevent Hamas' reconstruction. For one, the damage to Hamas was insufficient; in addition, Abu Mazen has no interest in handling the issue. He prefers the strategy of political confrontation with Israel in international institutions.

Policy Recommendations

1. Intelligence organizations must sound alerts when Hamas transitions from the recovery stage to the force reconstruction stage, with emphasis on buildup components and details about the pace of reconstruction for each Hamas capability.
2. The political echelon must recognize the danger of Hamas' current and future reconstruction and translate this understanding into concrete directives to the military, diplomatic, public relations, and legal establishments.
3. Preventing force reconstruction must head the agenda in the indirect talks in Cairo over a long term agreement. If the indirect talks do not result in an agreement that provides an effective response to reconstruction, Israel must formulate a strategy without Hamas' consent, though coordinated with Egypt and the United States, that will deal optimally with Hamas' future force reconstruction.
4. Israel must make sure to coordinate with Egypt increased efforts to block the dozens of smuggling tunnels left open between the Gaza Strip and the Sinai Peninsula.
5. Israel must convince its US and European allies that manufacturing strategic weapons and digging offensive tunnels are a *causus belli* for Israel, and that these are legitimate reasons for Israel to take military action in Gaza.
6. When formulating a plan for reconstructing the civilian and economic infrastructures of the Gaza Strip, it is necessary to establish an effective mechanism to prevent dual-use materials from falling into Hamas hands.

7. Israel must overtake Hamas in lesson-learning. There is nothing that prevents analysis and learning more than resting on one's laurels. The IDF must define the areas in which it must improve, chiefly: initiative, innovation, surprise, deception, and time and intelligence management to acquire high quality goals.

Conclusion

The issue of Hamas' force reconstruction must be brought back to center stage in the post-Operation Protective Edge era. The strategy now taking shape must ensure that any future military round against Hamas is postponed as much as possible, with Hamas' strategic arsenal comprising capabilities Israel knows and for which it already has appropriate operational responses. The most difficult dilemma the political and military echelons will face, and which deserves a thorough debate, is: what constitutes a level of force buildup by Hamas that would justify proactive military action, and how can Israel prevent being lulled into a sense of security in the short term and not risk having to pay a much steeper price down the road.

