

## Conclusion

### **The Strategic Balance of Operation Protective Edge: Achieving the Strategic Goal Better, Faster, and at a Lower Cost**

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Three military campaigns between Israel and Hamas have ended in an asymmetric strategic tie. On the one hand, there is no doubt that in the summer of 2014 Hamas suffered an enormous military blow and failed to achieve both its stated demands and its strategic goals. On the other hand, Hamas survived the battle against the IDF, the strongest army in the Middle East; it reasserted its ethos of “heroic resistance” through armed struggle and reached a ceasefire agreement whereby it neither gives up its weapons caches nor accepts restrictions on future arms buildup. In the short run, moreover, Hamas has likewise improved its standing among Palestinians. Given this outcome, Israel’s strategic thinking ought to focus on how to achieve a better strategic result in the next round of fighting, which one must presume will ultimately arrive.

Operation Protective Edge, the third round of fighting between Israel and Hamas, lasted 50 days. When it was over, Israel’s main accomplishment was a “ceasefire with no gains for Hamas,” as described by Israel’s Prime Minister. Nonetheless, and even if Israel did not initiate the fighting and was dragged into it, it should have leveraged Hamas’ determination to continue the battle in order to better achieve its strategic objective.

The way in which the campaign was conducted countered Israel’s traditional security concept, which is based on deterrence, early warning, and decision. Israel’s overwhelming military power and the results of the previous conflicts did not deter Hamas from initiating the recent offensive.

There was no specific intelligence indication or strategic warning about the approaching conflict, as demonstrated by cuts in the 2013 defense budget, the reduction in reserve soldier training, and the cessation of IAF training flights. Likewise, in the conflict itself, Israel did not achieve a decisive victory. Clearly, it is not possible to apply the traditional security concept to every campaign or round of conflict, but it is important that it serve as a fundamental frame of reference for the Israeli defense leadership. The IDF must strive to develop an operational concept that allows implementation of strategic objectives and conforms as much as possible to the State of Israel's current security concept.

Only the defense pillar of the current security concept (which was added at the recommendation of the Meridor Committee in 2005-6) functioned appropriately during Operation Protective Edge. However, the highly successful performance of Israel's defensive arrays allowed and brought about an estrangement from other very important elements of the traditional security concept: a short campaign, a clear victory, and the transfer of the fighting to enemy territory. In addition, because of strengthened defenses, many classic principles of war were disregarded: taking the initiative and going on the offensive; surprise and deception; concentration of effort; throwing the enemy off balance; and continuity of assault.

On the other hand, there is much logic to the claim that a campaign such as Protective Edge should not be examined on the basis of the IDF's traditional security concept or principles of war. It is very difficult to deter a terrorist organization, and it is certainly difficult to defeat it in a short war. A better analogy and reference point might be prolonged counterterrorism campaigns. For example, if one were to compare Operation Protective Edge to the challenging first three years of the second intifada and the waves of suicide bombings that killed hundreds of soldiers and civilians in Israel, Protective Edge presents as a short campaign with reasonable costs. Even the United States, the greatest military power in the world, was unable to achieve a decisive victory against the Taliban in Afghanistan, defeat al-Qaeda in the global war on terror, or eradicate Sunni and Shiite terrorism in Iraq over the course of a decade. With those military experiences as reference point, Israel's performance in Protective Edge is above par, notably when considering the fact that its main cities and population centers were targeted by rocket fire throughout the campaign.

No doubt in the world of asymmetric conflicts, other rules of war apply. This article discusses the tension between the need to preserve Israel's classic security concept while addressing the ever-changing characteristics of contemporary war. In this case, a war was waged against a low signature, semi-state organization that hides behind its civilians on the one hand, and has state responsibility and significant military capabilities on the other.

The article's central argument is that Hamas in Gaza is neither a classic terrorist organization nor it is a normal state. It falls under a new definition of a hybrid organization that includes elements of the two configurations. Therefore, when fighting against it, it is necessary to apply all elements of the classic security doctrine as well as mission-specific elements of a war against non-state terrorist organizations. Many of the principles of war remain valid for a war against an organization of this type. However, the main challenge is to identify the right elements of the battle against a hybrid threat and to prepare military solutions that will gain the following objectives: a clear political advantage in the arrangements subsequent to the battle; significantly enhanced deterrence; a shorter campaign duration; reduced costs; minimized damage to Israel's international standing; and the absence of escalation on Israel's other borders.

From Israel's perspective, some of the negative aspects of the recent campaign stemmed, paradoxically, from the relative success of Operation Pillar of Defense in 2012. It is commonplace that anyone who wins a battle and rests on his laurels has less motivation to learn, investigate, and prepare tactical and doctrinal solutions for the next round. Suffering significant blows, it appears that Hamas learned the lessons of Operation Cast Lead and Operation Pillar of Defense well, and prepared strategic tools and tactical solutions to neutralize Israel's advantages as those manifest in previous campaigns, mainly in intelligence and precision strike capabilities. In an INSS memorandum published in December 2012 following Operation Pillar of Defense, I wrote about the need to investigate and study a dozen key issues, including the failure to address the other side's arms buildup in the post-conflict settlement; the need for a deeper understanding of the asymmetry between the two sides' objectives and their respective definitions of victory; and the formulation of concrete military responses to address this asymmetry.

An excerpt from the recommendation I wrote then is still valid today:

Even if the IDF and the State of Israel believe that they won the battle, it is important that Israel conduct an investigation into the eight days of fighting [Operation Pillar of Defense]. This would be an investigation rather than an inquiry: an investigation seeks information on how to conduct the next battle more effectively, whereas an inquiry seeks to discover who is at fault, and who can be blamed for past actions. The political echelon can appoint its own internal Winograd commission, without public or media pressure and without the expectation that heads will roll or that a senior political or military figure will be removed from office. The chief of staff can also appoint a group of senior reservists to examine the systemic, strategic, operative, and logistical questions connected to the campaign.

Apparently, this recommendation was not adopted, perhaps explaining part of the problematic choice of strategic objectives and the operating concepts chosen for their implementation throughout Operation Protective Edge.

What follows are ten questions and topics for investigation to be explored in depth, this time in the wake of Operation Protective Edge. It would be best to probe these issues and questions in the appropriate forums in the General Staff, the Ministry of Defense, and the cabinet, and to provide a strategic, tactical, and operational response through a current and relevant security concept, a matching operational concept, and suitable force buildup and directives on the use of force.

1. *Did Israel understand the enemy's rationale and decision making process correctly?*

It is impossible to formulate a strategic objective without an in-depth understanding of the adversary. A professional debriefing process should be conducted with the goal of improving Israel's understanding of the rationale underlying Hamas' decisions and the manner in which it made them. This is the only way through which Israel might understand why it had no strategic warning that the deterrence achieved in Pillar of Defense eroded to a point of renewed hostilities in the summer of 2014. It would appear that there was a failure to internalize the realization that Hamas had given up on a Hamas-run Islamic state in Gaza because of its difficult political and financial situation following the change of regime in Egypt. The fact that the "keys to Gaza" were handed to the Palestinian unity government increased the attractiveness

of the military option for Hamas, and the significance of the military wing commanders increased in contrast to Hamas' political leadership in Gaza, whose influence ebbed. Even if the claim that Hamas itself did not intend to enter into battle is correct, why, nonetheless, was it dragged into one? In addition, it must be understood why Hamas repeatedly refused to accept the ceasefire proposals and why it violated them. After all, an organization that had been deterred and was not interested in fighting would be expected to accept a ceasefire at an early stage of the campaign, whereas Hamas agreed to a truce only after seven weeks of combat.

2. *Were the goals of the campaign correct? Were they too limited at the outset and unrealistic later on?*

Initially, Operation Protective Edge had three modest objectives: restore quiet to the south; restore deterrence; and strike a hard blow against Hamas. In fact, these three goals constituted different dimensions of the same objective: only if Hamas were hit sufficiently hard would it be deterred from further fighting, and thus quiet would be restored in the south. This goal was not achieved in six weeks of fighting and thousands of precision attacks against Hamas targets. Only in the seventh week, when the heads of the military wing of Hamas were targeted successfully and multi-story buildings in Gaza were struck, was Hamas hit hard enough to be deterred, and thereupon quiet was restored. The question of whether these objectives could have been achieved in the first or second week of the campaign is one Israel needs to probe thoroughly.

A subsequent goal was to destroy Hamas' offensive tunnels, and in this the IDF was very successful. The question here is why this objective was not defined at an earlier stage, as soon as the campaign began. Another goal, demilitarizing Gaza, was added to the list of objectives halfway through the operation. This is an important, worthwhile, and ambitious goal, but the way in which the operation developed did not support it. There was absolutely no chance that Hamas would voluntarily disarm. Neither Egypt nor NATO – let alone the Palestinian Authority – would be prepared to undertake a process that the IDF itself was not prepared to carry out. It would have been appropriate to set a more realistic goal for the political settlement stage, namely, preventing Hamas from undertaking a military buildup after the conflict. The correct approach would have been to agree on this not with Hamas, but with Israel's allies, Egypt and the United States, and to focus

in the agreement on preventing smuggling into the Gaza Strip and on the legitimacy of action against rocket and launch sites and production facilities, and against the digging of new offensive tunnels in Gaza.

3. *Was the paradigm of maintaining Hamas as the sovereign correct?*

In Israel's defense and political community in recent years, a basic assumption has taken hold that keeping Hamas as the sovereign power in Gaza is an Israeli interest because Hamas serves as a responsible ruling power that can also be deterred. This assumption was strengthened by the relative quiet between Israel and Hamas following Operation Pillar of Defense, after Hamas effectively enforced its rule in the entire area while preventing Islamic Jihad, the Popular Resistance Committees, and other armed groups from carrying out operations against Israel. Israel was concerned that without Hamas, a political vacuum would be created in Gaza that would serve as fertile ground for even more dangerous activity or a failed state, as occurred in Somalia and Libya. This paradigm led to a limited, gradual, and ineffective use of force that was contrary to the principles of war and the important objective of shortening the duration of the conflict.

This problematic paradigm should have been examined for the following reasons: (a) Hamas, with the help of Iranian and Qatari support, has proven that it is a danger to Israel's security, and that it is capable of establishing a rocket and tunnel arsenal that posed a strategic threat to the State of Israel. The substitute for Hamas – a collection of organizations that would fight each other – lacks the ability to create strategic threats on the scale of those Hamas created for Israel. (b) Since the Syrian state disintegrated, similar concerns have arisen about the danger of a lack of a central government on Israel's northeastern border, but thus far, this threat has not materialized. The situation on the Israeli-Syrian border is relatively stable and the assessments about waves of jihadists coming to attack Israel have not materialized. (c) Since Hamas knows in advance that Israel will not allow it to fall, it operates and attacks Israel with a certain immunity, which weakens Israel's position both militarily and politically. (d) A greatly weakened Hamas is a condition for an arrangement advantageous to Israel and for the possibility of effectively bringing the PA back to Gaza. Only if Israel had struck Hamas while liberating itself from concern for the group's survival could Hamas have been sufficiently weakened to allow for a good political arrangement after the operation.

4. *How should victory be defined? What is the appropriate concept when “victory” and “defeat” appear less relevant?*

In the past, victory in a war was clear: conquest of enemy territory and destruction of the enemy’s army. In Operation Protective Edge, neither side achieved victory in this sense, yet both sides claimed victory at the end of the campaign. On the one hand, there is no doubt that Israel was victorious militarily and accomplished most of the modest objectives it had set for itself. Moreover, Israel denied Hamas achievements from the two strategic military capabilities it had built since Operation Pillar of Defense: long range rockets, which, thanks to the Iron Dome system, were of minimal effectiveness, and offensive tunnels, which were destroyed by the IDF. On the other hand, Hamas too has a victory narrative that is based on having successfully coped with the strongest army in the Middle East, fired rockets for 50 days at most of Israel’s territory, pushed the IDF back to the Gaza border, harmed Israel’s economy, caused the closure of Israel’s airport, and emptied Israeli communities near Gaza of most of their residents. Hamas also showed the Palestinian people that the armed resistance was not defeated, that it retained its weapons, and that its path is preferable to Fatah’s political path.

Victory in a contemporary hybrid battle is achieved largely on the level of perceived perceptions, and in order to amass accomplishments on this level, force should be used in ways that achieve the necessary effect even under the limitations of asymmetric conflict. Using force in a creative and surprising way, beyond the enemy’s expectations, while effectively incorporating diplomacy and skillfully leveraging the issue in the media can create an effect of victory even in the modern battlefield against a hybrid enemy that combines the low signature of a terrorist organization with state responsibility and a state configuration. An unequivocal military achievement creates conditions for accomplishing political objectives.

It is too early to judge who won in the political arena. This can be assessed only when we study the arrangement that has still not been concluded. And if no formal arrangement is reached, it can be judged by the actual arrangement: Will deterrence be achieved and will there be quiet? For how long? Will Hamas return to a military buildup? What will be the outcome of the campaign from the broader perspective of Israeli-Palestinian relations? How will it influence potential future arenas of combat as Israel’s international standing?

5. *Was it possible to formulate a “third strategy”?*

The public, media, and political discourse in Israel debated two strategies: whether the goal was to strive for a ceasefire in Gaza – the position taken by the Prime Minister and the Defense Minister – or aim to conquer Gaza and eradicate Hamas, which was the Foreign Minister’s position. What was missing from the discussion was the “third strategy”: dealing a stronger blow against Hamas, with an emphasis on its military wing and its military installations, while undermining its confidence and capabilities through an ongoing series of surprise ground and air operations that are different from what could have been expected from the IDF. The attack vectors used by the IDF during Protective Edge were similar to those used in the past, and were therefore predicted and prepared for by Hamas. More innovative methods might include (a) pinpoint ground operations in Hamas’ core areas by a special task force, but not with the aim of conquering the entire Gaza Strip. Such a ground operation could take place in a number of unexpected ways; (b) surgical strikes against the heads of Hamas in the early stages of the fighting; (c) special forces operations to harm or arrest heads of Hamas and damage the organization’s strategic capabilities. It was wrong to discuss the IDF’s ground capabilities in terms of “all or nothing,” while creative ways could have been sought to strike Hamas effectively and quickly. At the heart of the third strategy is a different goal, which includes a better arrangement for Israel, based on preventing Hamas from growing stronger in the future. Hamas should have been weakened in such a way that it left the Palestinian people no doubt that the organization’s strategy of violence will not be able to promote its political objectives.

6. *How can the important accomplishment of preventing regional escalation be preserved?*

It is very important to create a supportive regional environment for an Israeli operation against a semi-state terrorist organization. It is even more important for a military operation in Gaza or Lebanon not to escalate into a regional conflict with Egypt, Jordan, Syria, or Iran. From this perspective, Operation Protective Edge was managed well: for 50 days, Israel carried out operations in the air, on land, and at sea, and the conflict was well contained. There was no military escalation to another front and almost no international pressure, and the “legitimacy battery” was recharged steadily through Israel’s repeated responsiveness to ceasefire proposals. Israel had

never before conducted a campaign in which other countries in the region, particularly Egypt, saw eye-to-eye with it on its operations against Hamas and gave it their backing, openly and through covert channels.

At the same time, while the Arab world agreed that Hamas terrorists should be dealt a hard blow, it unequivocally condemned the harm to innocent civilians in Gaza. In addition, the support for Israel's actions was apparently contingent on its not launching a ground operation, which is a very sensitive issue in the Arab world. It was the obligation of the intelligence agencies, the top military echelon, and the political leadership to ask themselves during every day of fighting whether the campaign was still limited to one front and what should be done in order to prevent escalation to others.

7. *How should Hamas' military buildup and the "trickle" between rounds of fighting be handled?*

The original sin of the arrangements between Hamas and the international community after Operations Cast Lead and Pillar of Defense was that the issue of the Hamas arms buildup was not dealt with effectively. In addition, the response to the renewal of the trickle of fire from Gaza was not sufficiently strong. Therefore, Hamas rebuilt its capabilities, and after a short time started firing again at Israel. If Israel does not wish to find itself in another conflict with Hamas within one to two years, it should carefully study its past failure in preventing Hamas' military buildup and the laxity of its response to Hamas fire. Mechanisms should be found to allow Israel, through cooperation with Egypt and the international community, to enforce effective prevention of a military buildup in the Gaza Strip. It is clear that this objective will not be achieved through the indirect talks in Cairo on a political arrangement between Israel and Hamas. Therefore, Israel should reach an agreement with its main allies, with the possibility of passing a resolution in the UN Security Council that would preserve its freedom of action against a Hamas buildup by means of rockets, tunnels, or any other way.

It is also important to ensure that the reconstruction of Gaza does not serve as a cover for a renewed buildup by Hamas, and that dual-use materials are used for civilian purposes only. The leading strategy ought to be an easing of the economic and civilian blockade, concomitant with a tightening of the blockade against the military buildup. The idea of economic and civilian reconstruction of Gaza will also help to establish deterrence – to raise the price for Hamas of losing a future conflict. A status quo should be established

in which Hamas does not engage in a military buildup and in which force buildup and/or a trickle of fire from Gaza are considered unacceptable and give Israel maximum legitimacy for an operation whose goal is to establish effective deterrence and prevent Hamas from rebuilding its military power.

8. *How can unnecessary friction between Israel and its most important ally – the United States – be avoided?*

The United States is not only Israel's most important ally – sometimes it is its only ally. In Operation Protective Edge, Israel had unnecessary altercations with the United States. The frustration after the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations were suspended several weeks before the start of the conflict in Gaza, as well as the ongoing lack of trust between the administration in Washington and Jerusalem, required greater attention to the formulation of understandings and a common language about the events taking place. Washington unequivocally supported Israel's right to self-defense. Nonetheless, the United States, like the Arab world, could not accept the number of casualties of uninvolved citizens and remain indifferent to the media reports from Gaza. Instead of working to strengthen communication and understandings between the countries, some senior officials and even the political leadership in both countries gave negative briefings and provided problematic leaks that aggravated the situation. Therefore, in any future campaign in which Israel is involved, expectations, rules of conduct, channels for achieving political settlements, and the red lines of the two countries should be clarified, with close attention paid to the need to maintain the important bilateral strategic alliance.

9. *Are we learning the correct lessons for confronting Hizbollah, Syria, and Iran?*

Iron Dome's ability to seal Israel's skies almost hermetically must not be allowed to create the illusion that the home front will be protected to a similar extent from the threat in the north. Israel's other enemies have much more extensive and more accurate missiles and drones, with heavier warheads. Therefore, the difference in the threat must be understood and a different answer provided. In particular, the public's expectations must be adjusted in order to prevent serious damage to its morale and functioning when the level of the response is different from that in Protective Edge. While a response to the missile and rocket threat from the north and the east is

more complicated, it is certainly possible if correct preparations are made. An attempt by Hizbollah to conquer territory in the north would not be an intelligence surprise; the group's leaders have spoken about this publicly. But anyone expecting that the enemy will reach Israel only through tunnels must assume that the border with Lebanon allows overland passage in areas with dense vegetation, and that it will be easier for the enemy to reach Israel by this route than through the tunnels. The enemy has also studied the IAF's ability to cause enormous damage to thousands of targets, its impressive attack output, its ability to hit state infrastructures, its well protected, armor-shielded tanks, and its other advanced capabilities. Thus, even if deterrence in the north has been very strong since 2006, Hizbollah's ability to arm itself with advanced systems and attempt to neutralize the IDF's advantages requires in-depth thinking and the ability to keep one step ahead of it.

#### 10. *How can the asymmetric strategic tie be broken?*

The concept of an asymmetric strategic tie was coined after the first two weeks of the campaign, during which the IDF was unable to impose a ceasefire on Hamas or achieve the modest goal set by the cabinet: quiet in exchange for quiet. Despite the number of targets struck and the intensity of the fire against Hamas assets in Gaza, it was clear that the attacks on Hamas did not achieve the desired effect. In particular, it was clear that the military wing of Hamas was not sufficiently harmed and that it wasn't been pressured enough by the public in Gaza to cease firing. On the other hand, Hamas had important propaganda achievements: it fired continuously at all ranges in the State of Israel; it forced millions of Israelis to run to shelters; it attacked IDF soldiers in assembly areas and in the guard tower on Kibbutz Nahal Oz; it dealt a heavy blow to the Israeli economy (estimated at 20 billion NIS); and it undermined the sense of security in the Gaza perimeter communities to the point that a large part of the population abandoned the area. Hamas also boasts that it succeeded standing up to the IDF for 50 days.

The heart of the solution to the asymmetric strategic tie is to free ourselves from the paradigm of maintaining Hamas as the party in charge, which compels us to limit the use of force. We should return to the use of force that contains innovative elements of surprise, stratagems, and maneuvers against important enemy centers of gravity. We must not return to the routine use of force seen in the last three rounds of fighting with Hamas. The challenge facing the top IDF echelon and the defense establishment

is to create the operational tools and plans that can go beyond the use of standoff firepower and achieve more meaningful strategic objectives than a conventional ceasefire and in a shorter time.

## **Conclusion**

Hamas in the Gaza Strip is not a major threat to the State of Israel or its security. Iran on the nuclear threshold, with the ability to break out to a nuclear bomb, remains Israel's most serious threat. Hizbollah is the second most serious military threat, and Syria, despite the civil war, also poses a greater threat than Hamas. In the summer of 2014, the IDF faced the weakest of Israel's enemies. Nevertheless, the modest objectives of Operation Protective Edge took too long to achieve, which is contrary to Israel's security concept. The price paid in terms of the economy; the ongoing damage to front line communities; the danger of regional escalation; the fear of an operational error with strategic significance; and the harm to Israel's relations with the nations of the world all make it necessary to have a clearer victory and a shorter campaign. This is also true about understanding the need for "strategic patience," which is derived from the limitations on the use of force in an asymmetric environment.

In light of the hybrid threat, the security concept must be updated to address both a conflict limited to the Gaza Strip and an all-out war scenario. The next conflict with Hamas in Gaza could take place at the same time as a conflict in the north against Hizbollah and/or Syria and Iran. Israel cannot proclaim victory in Operation Protective Edge and thus neglect the necessary challenge of debriefing thoroughly and learning. The Iranian issue and the emerging "bad deal" between the world powers and Iran will also return to the headlines soon, ahead of the November 24, 2014 deadline for the talks. Israel must not be distracted by current events and must complete the lesson learning process. It is inconceivable that the State of Israel and the IDF would not have a more sophisticated, decisive response to the threat of terror from Gaza. Before the next conflict erupts, new tools, mechanisms, and doctrinal methods must be developed that will allow a shorter campaign and a more decisive victory. Only in this way will it be entirely clear that Israel has not settled for a strategic tie. Israel must aim for a military victory, even without the toppling of Hamas and the total conquest of Gaza, while scoring clear military gains and striking a severe blow against Hamas capabilities. This victory will enable the achievement of the political goals, led by preventing a

Hamas military buildup; postponing the next conflict for as long as possible by depriving the enemy of capabilities and influencing its intentions (achieving deterrence); and above all, eliciting a deep understanding on the part of the Palestinians that they will not achieve more through violence than they would through peaceful negotiations.