



Gaza After Two Months – Consequences for Israel

Paul Rogers

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Introduction

The July briefing (written on 31 July) noted that the war in Gaza, the Israeli operation Protective Edge, had already exceeded the previous major Israeli operation, Cast Lead (2008-9) in length and, by the end of that month, after 24 days of conflict, attitudes were hardening. During August the conflict continued with intermittent cease-fires but towards the end of the month an indefinite ceasefire was agreed between Hamas and the Israeli government that also involved the participation of Fatah. By 31 August there were reasonable prospects that it would hold, but there were few indications that it could lead on to any kind of lasting agreement.

This briefing reviews the positions of Hamas and Israel at the end of August, assessing the extent of the damage and the security implications for each side. It then examines some of the wider regional elements, particularly in relation to Israeli perceptions of security, and how they may change.

Developments during August

By the start of the current ceasefire the war had lasted seven weeks. In Gaza, over 2,100 people were killed and 11,000 injured. UN sources stated that the great majority of those killed and injured were civilians, including 495 children killed. On the Israeli side, 66 soldiers were killed and 450 were injured. Seven civilians were killed and 80 injured. At the time of writing (31 August) a more durable ceasefire is in place, but more broadly based negotiations have yet to start.

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At the start of the current ceasefire Israel reported that all known infiltration tunnels had been destroyed, over 4,700 paramilitary targets hit and 750 terror combatants killed. Hamas denied that its paramilitary infrastructure was seriously damaged and claimed to have many thousands of rockets intact and 20-30,000 paramilitary fighters. Whatever the truth of the claims and counter-claims, the civil infrastructure in Gaza was severely damaged, with many factories and warehouses destroyed and around one-third of the entire population displaced.

In the Wake of the War

Hamas: In spite of the deaths, injuries and disruption, Hamas remains in control of Gaza and retains considerable popularity, although it has used substantial force in countering internal dissent including the summary execution of men and women deemed to have collaborated with the Israelis. It remains in an antagonistic relationship with President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi in Cairo and its backing of rebels in Syria has lost it support in Damascus and Tehran. It has so far failed to get a serious easing of the blockade.

Even so, it retains support of some Western Gulf States, especially Qatar which is expected to fund post-war reconstruction. Hamas has also gained much popular support across the Middle East and the wider world for its resistance to what is seen as Israeli aggression. Its recent link with Fatah has so far survived, despite the latter's ties to more conservative Arab states hostile to Hamas' links to the Muslim Brotherhood and Iran.

Israel: The Netanyahu government has lost much popular support through failing to control the rocket attacks, which were still happening right up to the ceasefire. The war is now being seen in significant sectors of Israeli opinion-

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forming as a serious political miscalculation. Netanyahu's personal popularity has suffered severely, although there is relief in southern Israel at the relative stability of the current ceasefire and the absence of air raid warnings.

Israel's more serious problems relate to its military posture. Following major problems in Lebanon in 2006, the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) embarked on a comprehensive modernisation of its ground war tactics. This was intended to provide a very high level of real-time network-centric warfare, principally the Tzayad system, allowing intensive interaction between the army, navy, air force, security and intelligence agencies and the military high command. This was expected to give Israel a considerable advantage in any future ground war, whether in Lebanon, Gaza or elsewhere.

Instead, the seven weeks of operation Protective Edge proved far more problematic than expected, with the IDF taking far higher casualties than in the 2008-09 conflict. In effect, Hamas paramilitaries learnt faster than the IDF and this means that Israel is currently unable to destroy the rockets, infiltration tunnels and Hamas's largely underground leadership organisation without a full-scale and long-term re-occupation of Gaza.

That could certainly be achieved but only with substantial IDF casualties as well as huge loss of life among Palestinians. These would likely be many times higher than those of Protective Edge, leading to far stronger international opposition to Israel, even from countries regarded as allies. This is currently too dangerous to contemplate, which means that Israel is in some difficulty. It either destroys Hamas as a threat but faces unacceptable loss of international support, or it accepts that the security of Southern Israel cannot be achieved by military operations.

Israeli Options

Israel's current problems have several elements, arising partly from the Gaza War:

- It is losing support in Europe and, to an extent, even in the United States where the Israel Lobby is increasingly dependent on the Christian Zionist community.
- Although less relevant at governmental level, there are serious risks of a major Boycott, Disinvestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement developing, especially in Europe.
- Perhaps most significantly, it does not seem possible to ensure security in Gaza by military means, but the belief that military strength is the ultimate guarantor of the state is deeply embedded in Israeli culture.

Israel's main advantage in relation to its security is its very close reliance on the United States. Many of the most significant military programmes, including strike aircraft and helicopter gunships, are clearly of US origin. Others, such as the Iron Dome, David's Sling and Arrow missile defence systems and the Tzayad network, are assumed to be indigenous but are, in reality, co-productions with US arms companies. The extensive US Government financial support for Israeli security systems, and the manner in which so much of the money feeds back to US companies means that the defence lobby in Washington has a very strong interest in ensuring the US Government policy towards the Israeli security system does not change. For now, this remains at least as important as the Israel Lobby itself.

Changing Times

There is, though, a problem. From the early 1950s and the rise of Arab Nationalism, especially in Nasser's Egypt, with its developing links with the Soviet bloc, Israel was seen in the United States as a western bulwark against potential Soviet expansionism. Indeed the 1967 Six Day War was seen in this context.

Then, the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s decreased Israel's relevance and was one factor contributing to a possible agreement at Wye River in 1998. That failed, but Israel was then helped by the election of President George W. Bush in 2000 and the War on Terror that followed the 9/11 attacks. From 2001 onwards, Israel had some success in representing itself as a bulwark not against the Soviet Union but in the face of Islamic terrorism. This was successful for some years but was undermined by Israel's settlements policies on the West Bank – not least its 31 August announcement that it would annex 3.8 km² of Palestinian land south of Jerusalem – and its heavy use of force in the 2006 Lebanon War.

Furthermore, from 2008 onwards, and especially with the killing of Osama bin Laden in 2011, there was a perception that the critical nature of the war on terror was diminishing. This was further enhanced by the policies of the incoming Obama administration and its planned withdrawal from Iraq and substantive withdrawal from Afghanistan.

In the past two years, though, the western view has changed radically and while the al-Qaida movement may be much diminished, its metamorphosis into a potent idea, with an impact stretching from Pakistan through the Middle East to North and West Africa, is causing great concern. This has been further exacerbated by the rapid rise of the Islamic State movement that now controls substantial territory and several million inhabitants. This provides Israel with a

most welcome opportunity to present itself once again as an island of stability and western influence in a highly volatile region.

It is here that the war in Gaza is so significant. Precisely at a time when Israel should have been able to capitalise on the turmoil across the Middle East, it finds itself unable to do so because of the considerable loss of support it has experienced through the devastation wrought on Gaza. Indeed, there is even a tendency in Western Europe to see Israel as part of the problem, not the solution.

Conclusion

The impact of this should not be underestimated. The miscalculation of the Netanyahu government in mounting Protective Edge in Gaza is seen primarily in terms of domestic politics but its real significance lies in this international dimension. It follows that in the coming weeks the failure of the Kerry initiative earlier this year may be seen as a lost opportunity that Israel may come to regret, especially as the United States persists in seeking an agreement with Iran on the vexed nuclear issue.

One outcome of the Gaza War may be that sufficient political opinion develops in Israel to make it possible to renew a wider negotiation with the Palestinians. Whether that can extend to an acceptance of a two-state solution may still be very much open to question, but the Gaza War may come to be seen as making that more rather than less likely.

Photo: *Residents of Beit Hanoun in Gaza retrieve the dead from rubble.* **Source:** [Wikipedia](#).

About the *Author*:

Paul Rogers is Global Security Consultant to Oxford Research Group and Professor of Peace Studies at the University of Bradford. His 'Monthly Global Security Briefings' are available from our website, where visitors can sign-up to receive them via our newsletter each month.

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101 Clerkenwell Road London
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