

Global Security Briefing – July 2014

Gaza: Context and Consequences

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Summary

At the time of writing (31 July), Israeli *Operation Protective Edge* had exceeded the previous major operation, *Cast Lead* of 2008-9. Both operations have involved intensive use of air strikes combined with major ground incursions. The current war is already longer than the 2008-9 war, with no end in sight. Indeed, by the end of July, positions were hardening and prospects for anything longer than brief further humanitarian pause seemed remote. This briefing provides some context for the conflict together with a preliminary analysis of possible consequences.

The War So Far

The current war started on 8 July with intensive Israeli air and artillery assaults on Hamas paramilitary targets, intended primarily to destroy or greatly limit the Hamas ability to fire unguided rockets over much of Israel. In spite of the level of force used, the rocket fire continued, amidst growing concern within the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) that paramilitaries had constructed many more infiltration tunnels than had been realised.

A ground assault followed the initial air assault, with this being intended to destroy rocket launch facilities and stores and also interdict tunnels. As a consequence of this assault, the IDF suffered many casualties, including the deaths of 13 men from the elite Golani Brigade in a single day (20 July). Even after 10 days of conflict, with intensive IDF operations against the infiltration tunnels, Hamas paramilitaries managed to get under the border and in a brief attack killed five young IDF sergeants on a leadership training course. One Hamas paramilitary was killed but others appear to have returned to Gaza.

Over the course of the war so far, Israeli forces have struck at over 3,700 targets in Gaza while more than 2,700 rockets have been launched by Hamas and other groups from Gaza towards Israel. The death toll among Palestinians exceeds 1,350 and is rising markedly each day. At least 6,000 people have been injured. Israel has lost 56 soldiers and three civilians, and more than 400 soldiers have been wounded. On 31 July, the 24th day of the war, Israel announced the calling up of a further 16,000 reservists, to bring the total call-up to 86,000.

There has been considerable controversy over the numbers of civilian casualties in Gaza, especially the hitting of schools, hospitals and a market. UN figures indicate that at least 70% of those killed are civilians, and nongovernmental international support for Hamas has increased substantially. Public opinion in Israel remains very strongly in favour of continuing the war as a means of stopping the rockets and destroying the infiltration tunnels.

Support for the Adversaries

Hamas: In the past three years, Hamas has lost much of its international support from governments in the region, even though Gaza has existed in what amounts to an open prison controlled by Israel. The Egyptian government of President Sisi is strongly opposed to the Muslim Brotherhood and regards Hamas as a part of this wider movement. The consequent near-total closure of the common border with Gaza and the control of access tunnels has had a marked economic effect on Gaza, exacerbating its siege status. Furthermore, Hamas's support for Islamist paramilitaries in Syria has lost it the support of the Assad regime in Syria and, to an extent, of the Iranian government.

The recent rapprochement between Hamas and Fatah survives, if currently strained, but causes the Israeli government considerable concern. In spite of all the limitations, Hamas's paramilitary wing has been able to assemble many thousands of rockets and mortar rounds and has also built a network of robust infiltration tunnels that has greatly exceeded Israel's pre-war estimates. Hamas as a movement retains considerable support in Gaza, with even the impact of the Israeli air and ground assaults having little effect.

Israel: Israel retains a measure of support of many western governments but there are growing concerns at the civilian losses in Gaza. The IDF and the defence industry as a whole have very close connections with their US counterparts. The key missile defence system, *Iron Dome*, is essentially a US-Israeli joint production, including current plans to set up a new production line in the US. Israel is also able to use US munitions stored in Israel. The US is in a position to put very heavy pressure on Israel but is deeply reluctant to do this at present, mainly because of domestic support for Israel. This support remains high but is declining.

Cast Lead and Protective Edge

Both the 2008-09 and 2014 Israeli operations have had similar aims - to so damage Hamas that it is massively restricted as a threat to Israeli security. A comparison of the operations so far is indicative. *Cast Lead* lasted 23 days and ended with a ceasefire brokered largely by Egypt. During that period, Hamas and other groups launched 750 rockets and mortars, all relatively short-range. Israelis lost 13 lives, four of them to friendly fire. Israel killed 1,440 people in Gaza, claiming that half were militants, though Hamas denied this.

Since the 2008-09 operation, Israel has deployed the *Iron Dome* system, and this has intercepted the great majority of approximately 2,700 rockets and mortars fired during *Protective Edge*. Hamas has, though, hugely increased its capabilities over the past six years, in spite of its recent political isolation, and has exacted a much higher toll on IDF soldiers during the current ground assault than in 2008-09: 56 so far compared with 13 before. In this sense, the aim of *Cast Lead* - to substantially degrade Hamas's crude offensive systems - was a singular failure. Even with the *Iron Dome* system, vulnerabilities have been demonstrated by

the closure of Ben Gurion Airport to several international carriers for several days last week, following a rocket which penetrated the missile shield and landed within a mile of what is Israel's gateway airport.

The loss of so many Israeli soldiers may still seem small compared with the huge losses in Gaza, but the IDF is held in very high regard in Israel. Indeed, support for the war has likely increased because of these losses and the partial closure of the airport. These appear to have combined to convince many Israelis that, though Hamas is weak and hugely restricted in its location, it represents such a threat to Israel that a protracted war is, if need be, fully justified. The phrase "impregnable in its insecurity" has sometimes been applied to Israel and it is useful in understanding the outlook of a very powerful country that still feels vulnerable.

What Now?

At the time of writing (31 July) it is possible that another humanitarian pause might be agreed and might lead to something more substantial. Assuming that this does now happen, the indications are that the IDF will continue its operations to destroy rockets and tunnels, and Hamas paramilitaries will resist. Given the IDF casualties to date, a pattern is likely to emerge in which urban counter-paramilitary operations will prove both difficult and costly, and the IDF will rely much more on its huge firepower advantage. This is very much what happened with US and coalition forces in Iraq from 2003, and even more so with the Israeli siege of West Beirut in 1982 when at least 10,000 people were killed, the great majority of them civilians.

It is already evident that targeting has moved on to the more general Hamas infrastructure, but the very nature of the densely populated Gaza Strip means that the infrastructure for the whole community is also hugely affected. Given the existing impoverishment of the area, the human consequences will be severe, as UN staff have been pointing out repeatedly.

Consequences

In all of its operations against Hamas - *Cast Lead* in 2008-09, the more limited air assault in 2012, and the current war - Israel has sought to severely damage Hamas's paramilitary capabilities, and decrease its domestic support. In the first two conflicts that objective was not achieved, and it is unlikely that Israel's current operation will succeed this time around. In spite of Hamas's greater international isolation, its paramilitaries have this time had a substantial impact on the IDF, and the movement retains domestic support. Moreover, international public opinion has moved heavily against Israel.

One of the major changes in comparing the current war with the two previous wars is that the use of social media has hugely expanded, resulting in graphic images being distributed across the region and beyond in near-real time. One effect of this, in turn, is that the more conventional western media reporting is itself becoming more graphic. In spite of a very efficient Israeli information operation, this change is working against Israel's interests.

It also means that Islamist propagandists across the Middle East and beyond are easily able to present the war as a further example of “Zionist aggression”. Indeed, they will also relentlessly point to close US-Israel links, further developing their long-term image of a “Crusader-Zionist war on Islam”, in spite of Secretary of State Kerry’s undoubted personal commitment to achieving a ceasefire. The long-term consequences of this are difficult to read, but could give a boost to radicalisation well beyond Israel and the occupied territories. That alone is an added reason why a ceasefire at the earliest opportunity is not only desirable but essential.

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