



## THE ROAD TO PROTECTIVE EDGE

### Israel-Hamas Confrontation in Gaza

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IN ORDER TO UNDERSTAND the military dimension of the confrontation between Israel and Hamas in Gaza, one must understand the strategic context in which it has taken place. In the 1980s, the Muslim Brotherhood began developing its Palestinian branch in the West Bank and Gaza, areas then held entirely by Israel. Gradually, during the first intifada (1987–93), and especially in the 1990s, the organization accumulated support in Palestinian society, contributing to its growing power. Hamas, which offered a combination of Palestinian nationalism and radical political Islam, became stronger

PICTURED: IRON DOME MISSILE DEFENSE SYSTEM, COURTESY IDF.



based on its extensive social and welfare services. Hamas has since led the violent opposition to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and to the Palestinian Authority (PA), which was set up in 1993 in the Palestinian territories and seen from the outset by many Palestinians as foreign and corrupt.

One of Hamas's strategic pillars involves seeking an ideologically compatible patron that will provide diplomatic backing and representation, along with financial support. Over the years, different countries have filled this role, including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar, and Iran.

The 1990s and 2000s were decades in which suicide bombers, mostly Hamas operatives, shook Israel's cities. From 1994 to 1997 alone, 160 Israeli civilians were killed in the attacks. These attacks not only granted Hamas massive popularity on the Palestinian street, they also hindered any ability to advance Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. At their peak, Hamas's terrorism operations played a critical role in the victory of Israel's right-wing Netanyahu government in the 1996 elections. In the following decade, the organization's attacks, a central component of the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, continued. From 2001 to 2003, during the heat of the second intifada, known as the al-Aqsa intifada, approximately a hundred suicide bombings were carried out in Israel. This time, other Palestinian organizations joined in the attacks in an effort to share in Hamas's popularity. Four hundred and fifty Israeli citizens were killed in these three years alone.<sup>1</sup>

In the mid-2000s, the Israeli government perceived a stalemate. The growing volume of suicide bombings in Israeli territory, alongside the rocket attacks that began emerging from PA-controlled Gaza in 2000, fueled Israeli doubts regarding any opportunity for political progress with the Palestinians. In 2002, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's government initiated a major operation to quash the escalating violence, in which West Bank cities were reconquered and many terrorist cells were eliminated. Nonetheless, it became clear to Sharon's government that as long as free and open movement existed from the Palestinian territories into Israel, the complete prevention of terrorism would be impossible. The security fence, begun in 2002, represented the first manifestation of Israel's separation from the Palestinians. Then, in summer of 2005, in one of the most dramatic acts in Israeli history, the government forcibly evacuated 8,000 Israeli settlers, mostly living in isolated enclaves in the heart of the Gaza Strip, and

turned Gaza into the first significant Palestinian area free of any Israeli civil or military presence.

Hamas, the leading resistance movement, received widespread credit among Palestinians for "expelling" Israel from the Gaza Strip, similar to what Hezbollah had purportedly accomplished in Lebanon five years prior. In 2006, Hamas stunned observers by winning the majority of seats in the Palestinian parliament following elections held under U.S. pressure. Mustafa Barghouti, a Fatah official who ran against Mahmoud Abbas in the 2005 presidential elections, said, "I think they [Fatah] did not have a clue that they were going to lose in the parliament. Had they had a clue, I don't know what they would have done."<sup>2</sup> Then U.S. secretary of state Condoleezza Rice later acknowledged at the United Nations that the United States had underestimated Hamas's popularity, stating, "It does say something about us not having a good enough pulse."<sup>3</sup> In 2007, protesting a failure to actually implement the election results, Hamas took control of Gaza by force.

Beginning in 2007, Hamas thus found itself in a new reality, functioning as a de facto government. Moreover, this was the first territory in the Arab world—indeed the only one, excepting the later rule by Mohamed Morsi in Egypt in 2012–13—where the Muslim Brotherhood's political vision would be realized. But the Hamas government was not recognized by the international community, and certainly not by the PA.

Although a governing entity, Hamas still defines itself as a resistance movement obligated to continually fight Israel. More important, it seeks to expand its rule to the rest of PA-controlled territory, and ultimately to gain control over the entire territory that today encompasses the state of Israel. While Hamas was busy undermining PA rule and resisting Israel through constant border skirmishes, Gaza remained completely dependent on the flow of electricity and water from Israel and Egypt, as well as funds from the PA. Still, these contingencies did not stop Hamas operatives from repeatedly attacking the commercial crossing with Israel, disregarding Gazan dependence on this crossing for sustenance and thereby abdicating its responsibility as a governing actor.

Hamas walks a fine line between governing the Strip and maintaining its character as a resistance organization; while it takes concrete measures to improve the lives of Gazans during calm periods, in wartime it seeks only to damage Israel, at the grave expense of Gazans' well-being, as reflected in the border crossing attacks.

This is deeply reflected in Hamas's concept of urban warfare, with countless examples of Hamas deliberately putting Gazans in the line of fire.

## **Development of Hamas's Military Concept**

The Hamas military concept evolved from an early focus on terrorism to a more formal military structure during the Oslo years, with an eventual emphasis on rocket attacks against Israeli civilian areas and a tunnel network used to facilitate various forms of infiltration. The emergence of a "Hamastan" in Gaza, following the group's June 2007 triumph over rival Fatah, facilitated such advances.

**CLASSICAL TERRORISM YEARS.** Hamas developed as both a political movement and a terrorist organization, with the two parallel wings strengthening and backing the other's operations. From 1985 to 1993, the movement operated in the Palestinian territories as one of several resistance groups engaged in terrorism, composed of hidden cells that acquired weapons and explosive materials to carry out attacks in Israel.

**THE MILITARY WING.** The transfer of most of the Gaza Strip to PA control in 1993 created an independent Palestinian sanctuary to which Israeli intelligence and special operators lacked access for the first time in decades. Gaza became a densely crowded territory in which the PA allowed, sometimes intentionally and other times by willful negligence, the terrorist organization to develop and grow. This development was greatly enhanced by the return of four hundred Hamas operatives who had been deported to Lebanon in 1992 following a terrorist attack. The operatives had stayed in a deportation camp where they were trained by Iranian and Hezbollah personnel. In returning to the Gaza Strip and West Bank, the deportees brought with them not only new military knowledge but also wide-ranging connections with Iran and Hezbollah. As Israel conducted a low-grade war with Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas observed that the Shia militia's rockets posed an effective threat to Israeli communities (as elaborated later). With the help of returning Hamas operatives, the organization adopted mortar technology while perfecting the weapons and strategies pioneered by Hezbollah.

Israel's unilateral exit from Lebanon in June 2000 created a wave of euphoria in the Arab world. It was,

in Arab eyes, the first victory over the state of Israel. This victory was not accomplished by an Arab state, but instead by a radical Islamic organization that did not belong to any state. Hezbollah, which had grown close to Hamas following the deportation of Hamas figures to Lebanon in the 1990s, developed a complex fighting method. This entailed guerrilla attacks on Israel Defense Forces (IDF) targets in Lebanon, while holding Israeli communities hostage with rocketfire that limited Israel's freedom of action in the field.

**HAMAS ROCKET TERRORISM.** In early 2001, six months after the IDF withdrew from Lebanese territory, Hamas began launching mortar shells from populated Palestinian territories toward Israeli settlements within the Gaza Strip. In April, the first self-made Hamas rocket was launched toward the Israeli city of Sderot. Soon, the reality for Israeli citizens living near the border included sirens, protected structures, and casualties, such as when a Hamas rocket hit a kindergarten in Sderot, killing two children. Hamas enjoyed distinctly favorable conditions in Gaza, as compared to the West Bank, allowing it to build its military wing: the group was simultaneously free from Israeli presence and control and not isolated, given its ability to acquire outside materials and knowledge through the Egyptian border. These conditions allowed the creation of a military infrastructure and the training of armed militias and fighting units. From the moment it emerged, the strategy of resistance by launching or threatening to launch rockets became the main such strategy used by Hamas (along with other organizations in Gaza), as seen in figure 1. Hamas has gradually increased the range of its rockets and its local production capabilities in a consistent and systematic fashion. Hamas has also fielded a growing array of rockets as part of a clear effort to bring more Israeli population centers within reach of its rocket force, and into the battleground (see figure 2).

The rocket concept, meanwhile, changed the confrontation from a bilateral one, between an army and a terrorist organization, to a multifaceted one, including the Israeli civilian population. In other words, Hamas changed the rules, decreasing Israeli military freedom of operation on the premise that Israel would not let its own citizens suffer consequences from these operations. As a result, the IDF found its hands tied, and reluctantly allowed Hamas to develop and enhance its military force.

**THE SUBTERRANEAN DIMENSION.** Ever since the city of Rafah was halved in 1982, following the Israel-Egypt peace agreement and the return of the Sinai Peninsula to Egyptian sovereignty, inhabitants have made use of tunnels as a part of their daily routine. The tunnels were initially employed mainly for family reunification, the smuggling of cheap merchandise from Sinai, and the exfiltration of wanted terrorists from Israel-ruled Gaza into the “safe haven” of Egyptian Sinai. In the 1990s, as Hamas built itself into a military organization, the tunnels were also used to smuggle war materials and rockets. Between 1994 and 1999, the IDF was positioned in a narrow strip separating Egyptian from Palestinian Rafah known as the Philadelphia Corridor. In those years, the IDF found more than 50 smuggling tunnel shafts along the Philadelphia Corridor. From 2000 to 2004, an additional 120 tunnel shafts were uncovered in the same border strip. While the IDF was able to locate many of the shafts, the full extent of the tunnel network remains unknown.

The proliferation of tunnels reflected increasingly intense violence in Gaza, while boosting Hamas’s military wing by allowing militants to smuggle standard rockets, mostly made in Iran, from Sinai into the territory. Soon thereafter, Hamas discovered the military potential of the underground realm. The first tunnel bomb was detonated below an IDF military post near Rafah in September 2001.

In the years 2003–2006, more tunnel bombs were used, and a new phenomenon emerged—offensive tunnels penetrating into Israeli territory. In February 2004, a small group of terrorists used an underground tunnel to invade the Erez border crossing, which facilitated the movement of supply trucks into Gaza, and attack Israeli civilians and soldiers on Israeli soil.

In June 2006, a small group of Hamas militants entered Israeli territory near the village of Kerem Shalom, adjacent to the triangle border separating Israel, Gaza, and Sinai, attacked a tank crew, and dragged one of its fighters—Cpl. Gilad Shalit—into the Strip. Following persistent Hamas rocketfire toward Israeli populations, the IDF embarked on several operations in the northern Gaza Strip. The operations targeted the outskirts of the cities from which the rockets were launched, and marked the beginning of IDF ground divisions operating with close coordination and fire support from aircraft with which they were paired. During these operations, a new phenomenon emerged in the streets of two Gaza cities, Beit Lahiyah and Beit Hanoun. Sheets of cloth and nylon were spread out over the streets in order to block IDF aerial observations. This was a pivotal moment in which Hamas, similar to Hezbollah, became aware of its total exposure to IDF airpower. Several years later, during Operation Cast Lead (2008–2009), IDF soldiers discovered that Hamas had developed an underground infrastructure

FIGURE 1



meant to enable Hamas fighters to engage without exposing themselves to airpower.

Meanwhile, even before the 2008–2009 confrontation, Hamas prepared concealed underground rocket launchers that were exposed only when being operated. This method proved extremely effective, and became the primary launch method used by the organization.

On August 11, 2012, the eve of Operation Pillar of Defense, Hamas detonated an explosive-filled tunnel against IDF forces engaged in routine activity in Israeli territory east of the security barrier.

The latest phase in the development of Hamas subterranean capabilities, starting in 2012, came with the building of an operational infrastructure of offensive tunnels into Israeli territory, such that every Hamas battalion, spread across the Israeli border, had direct access to a tunnel that would allow its militants to cross into Israeli territory when the time came.

The underground realm was thus transformed from a mere method of smuggling goods from Egypt to Gaza into the central element in the fight against Israel. Tunnels were now being used offensively to infiltrate into Israel, penetrate and detonate explosives within Israeli territory, store and provide concealed launching pads for Hamas rockets, and as a defensive capability during wartime via the underground network within the Strip itself.

**THE “HAMASTAN” FIGHTING CONCEPT.** When Hamas took control of the Gaza Strip in July 2007, it found itself free to strategize, developing a comprehensive fighting concept along with a professional and structured military wing to serve as the de facto army of “Hamastan.” At the same time, the organization was busy setting up its civil infrastructure—staffing its police forces, courts, city councils, and government offices. Nonetheless, this newfound governmental responsibility did not restrain Hamas’s militant activity. Hamas not only acted with all its means to build broad territorial military structures with thousands of fighters but also continued to harass Israeli civilians and military targets.<sup>4</sup>

Around then, Hamas developed another technique: allowing other Palestinian organizations to launch rockets from Gaza into Israel in order to retain plausible deniability and avoid Israeli retaliation. This ploy, however, was not extremely effective, given that Israeli policy places full sovereign responsibility on Hamas for what occurs in Gaza. And despite the shift, most of the violent actions from Gaza in those years originated from Hamas.

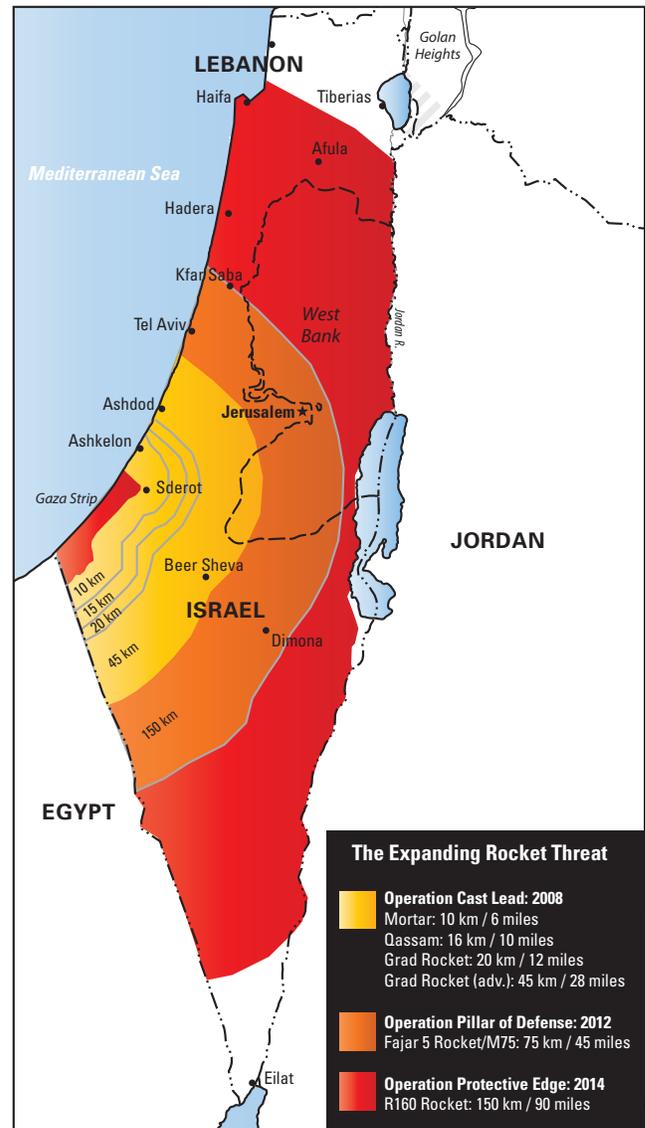


FIGURE 2

During certain instances when Hamas has wanted to maintain quiet, it has found itself in quite a different position: attempting to prevent the other terrorist organizations from firing rockets into Israeli territory and carrying out attacks in Israel. In this endeavor, it has experienced moderate success, whether by reaching agreement with these groups or through deterrence and intimidation. However, given its status in the resistance, it has only a limited ability to “resist the resistance” from other terrorist groups. Therefore, Hamas often chooses to look the other way regarding such attacks, and takes a generally forgiving stance toward the perpetrators, even if it ultimately has to pay the price by incurring IDF retaliation.

The organization used its freedom to build up its military power in two main efforts: First, it founded territorial

units whose duty was to protect specific neighborhoods in Gaza's urban areas in the case of an IDF invasion. These organizations were trained to fight in populated areas and to prepare additional underground fighting infrastructures. Second, Hamas extended the range of its rockets so that it could launch salvos from the heart of Gaza City. This was a direct lesson from Operation Days of Penitence in 2004, when the IDF could focus its activity on the relative restriction of launching areas adjacent to Gaza's northern border because of the limited range of Hamas rocketfire.

Finally, Hamas came to realize that fighting within highly populated areas offered a win-win situation, forcing the IDF into one of two bad choices. The Israeli force could decide not to attack in areas where civilian casualties would be too high, exposing millions of Israeli civilians to rocketfire and allowing Hamas to protect itself. Alternatively, the IDF could attack Hamas in these areas, which would result in civilian casualties, tarnishing the image of the IDF internationally and stoking a perception that it causes damage to women and children. Here, Hamas also anticipated long-term consequences in the form of anti-IDF lawsuits filed at the International Court of Justice at The Hague. In light of this context, Hamas rocket-launching activities should not be seen as a military capability *per se*, given their positioning amid kindergartens and markets, and aimed at neighborhoods, schools, hospitals, and commercial centers in Israeli territory. The rockets, of course, could be viewed as a tool of normative warfare, but more truly they constitute a means to terrorize Israel.

**HAMAS'S FIGHTING CONCEPT.** Operation Cast Lead, which transpired from December 2008 to January 2009, saw the IDF attacking in northern and southern Gaza following rocket strikes into Israel's home front. In this, the first major Israel-Hamas confrontation since the 2007 Strip takeover, Israel sought to stop the launches by besieging Gaza City and severing the connection between the territory's southern and northern sections. Israel also tried to exact a price from Hamas for its provocations, to take control of the launching areas to minimize launches, and to cut off the flow of rockets from Sinai to eventually prevent Hamas from continuing its launches entirely (see figure 3). Following an agreement signed in Egypt with international participation, the operation ended after twenty-five days without any major progress from Israel in scaling back Hamas's rocket-launching

capabilities. According to the agreement, Egypt and the Western coalition promised Israel that it would prevent the smuggling of additional weapons into Gaza. IDF forces had come close to the heart of Gaza, threatening Hamas rule. They could have easily continued to advance, but they exited, leaving the existing system intact.

After the fighting, Hamas began a broad process designed to strengthen the two central pillars of its military concept. For its defensive pillar, Hamas reinforced its territorial units, increasing the number of fighters, improving the training and fitness of its commanders, and smuggling advanced weapons into Gaza, including advanced shoulder-launched anti-aircraft and antitank missiles. A special emphasis was placed on the subterranean realm, and these territorial battalions began to assume responsibility for not only local underground posts but also the connective tunnels between those tunnels focused on offense and defense, in effect creating a weblike underground city. For the offensive pillar, Hamas operated vigorously to improve its self-made manufacture of rockets. By smuggling new rockets into Gaza and extending their range, Hamas sought to increase the number of Israeli civilians under threat while making all Gaza into an effective launch space, in such a way that would prevent the IDF from encircling and isolating one particular launch area. In other words, the next time Israel seeks to stop the rocketfire targeting its citizens, it will have to conquer Gaza in its entirety and will be forced to encounter the well-prepared defense mechanisms in the heart of Gaza's crowded cities. To this end, Hamas adapted and enhanced a concept from the Vietnam War during the 1970s and from Hezbollah in 2006, according to which the Gaza population functions as a protective shield, presenting an obstacle for attacks against various targets and fighting in urban areas.

Thus, a military solution for the rockets would require, as far as Israel is concerned, a full military occupation of the Gaza Strip and full control over its 1.8 million citizens. Hamas well understands that Israel has zero political desire to do this. Hamas's idea here is relatively simple. Since Israel does not want to pay the political price associated with reconquering the Strip, it has no other option but to accept a reality in which steadily, if occasionally, incoming rockets terrorize hundreds of thousands of Israeli citizens. Hamas's strategy, moreover, has allowed it to maintain the jihadist logic that guides its actions as a resistance movement—the justification for its existence—without endangering its



FIGURE 3: OPERATION CAST LEAD

sovereign control of Gaza. It successfully created a fundamentally new political equation to neutralize Israel.

Almost three years after Cast Lead, the situation in Gaza led to another round of violence. This time, the fighting lasted eight days, during which IDF ground forces refrained from entering the Strip. Hamas saw this nonentry as a validation of one of its base assumptions: that Israel would do everything in its power to avoid retaking the Strip, given the associated costs economically and in soldiers' lives. The Israeli stance likewise validated the operational concept behind Hamas's base assumption—namely, that territorial brigades, expan-

sion of rocket capabilities, and development of the subterranean realm were succeeding in achieving Hamas's goals. Yet even while the eight-day conflict revealed a diminishment of Israeli deterrence, Operation Pillar of Defense did demonstrate one Israeli innovation in the form of Iron Dome, a mobile defense system designed to intercept rockets, thereby countering one of Hamas's three strategic pillars.

In operating against Iron Dome, Hamas understood that it faced a new problem. The militant group had been alternating its rocket attacks between cities, in an attempt to locate weak points in the Israeli protective

umbrella. Toward the end of the fighting, Hamas even tried to launch barrages to test Iron Dome's limits. But the system proved effective even against the barrages, which averaged about two hundred rockets a day. In Operation Pillar of Defense, then, Israel showed that, aided by a good defensive system, it could manage an extended confrontation without employing massive ground forces, while exacting a heavy price from Hamas through precise aerial attacks—a development to which Hamas had to forge an urgent response.

And so, nearly two years later, in summer 2014, Hamas accelerated the development of two more innovations. First, it prepared a large number of secret infiltration tunnels and elite Nukhba forces to use them to enter Israel. Indeed, this concept was born after the 2008–2009 confrontation. Here, tunnels held the promise of registering showcase achievements for Hamas, echoing the 2006 Shalit kidnapping, and pushing prospective fighting into Israeli territory. Yet another dimension, possibly added after 2012, involved the notion that tunnel raids could avert the Iron Dome problem, while continuing to grant Hamas a veto over peace and stability in Israel's south. Second, Hamas attempted to employ its rockets in a way that would neutralize Israeli defenses. Toward this goal, Hamas extended, once again, the range of its rockets, on the assumption that Iron Dome batteries could only be enlisted to defend a limited number of Israeli towns and cities. Hamas further developed the ability to launch more-concentrated barrages, believing that such attacks could saturate Israeli defenses, inevitably allowing some rockets through.

That same summer of 2014, amid escalation along the Gaza border, Hamas and Israel were compelled to engage in another violent confrontation, on new terms. The unfamiliar threat faced by Israel consisted of raids in its territory by ground forces that infiltrated via secret tunnels. Hamas, meanwhile, found itself dealing with an active rocket-defense system that had been developed faster than expected and withstood all the challenges Hamas had prepared for it. Thus, for fifty-one days the basic concepts held by both sides were put to the test.

Yet before examining how both sides dealt with this new reality, the next section lays out the development of the Israeli fighting concept that prevailed before Operation Protective Edge, based on the notion, originating during the Six Day War, that Israeli territory must not

be threatened by an Arab military force. The Hamas concept, for its part, held that the ability to successfully terrorize Israel is directly proportional to the amount of rockets in its arsenal.

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### ***The Israeli Concept for Fighting Hamas***

Since the 1990s, the strategy adopted by various Israeli governments was based on the assumption that control over hostile Arab populations constituted an undesirable burden. The Palestinian rebellion from 1987 to 1993 and the constant fighting in southern Lebanon correspondingly tipped the scales toward a policy of separation. Therefore, in 1993, when the Oslo Accords were signed, the Palestine Liberation Organization was given control over most of the Gaza Strip and the cities of the West Bank. In 1999, Ehud Barak was elected Israeli prime minister under the slogan “Withdraw from Lebanon,” leading to the 2000 Israeli withdrawal. In May 2002, following the outbreak of the al-Aqsa intifada, the wave of terrorism that accompanied this uprising, and Operation Defensive Shield in the West Bank, Israel began to build a security fence in order to separate most of the Israeli population from most of the Palestinian population in the West Bank. In 2004, the Israeli right was shocked when Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, admired by the settler movement and a traditional supporter of Greater Israel, presented a plan to unilaterally withdraw from the Gaza Strip. The initiative, which involved the evacuation of Israeli settlements for the first time since 1982, and on a scale unprecedented in Israel, was in retrospect the high-water mark of Israel's separation strategy.

This Israeli strategy was based on two basic understandings. The first was that offensive operations that result in Israeli control over hostile territories had created distress for Israel on multiple levels. On the sociopolitical level, Israeli public opinion had become polarized over the Israeli presence in Lebanon and the territories. On the military level, the IDF was fatigued from never-ending security assignments, damaging its war readiness. Economically, the Israeli state used large numbers of reserve forces in the two Palestinian uprisings, threatening to bring the economy to a breaking point.

The second point has to do with the changing Israeli military concept. Like the U.S. Armed Forces in the lead-up to the first Gulf war, the IDF went through a

revolution relating to intelligence and precision targeting. The political negotiation with Syria in the 1990s, for example, leaned on the assumption that in an age of precision capabilities, Israel could possibly withdraw from the Golan Heights without critically harming its ability to defend itself. This reliance on precision strikes, during that same decade, became the IDF's main fighting method in initiated operations. In Lebanon, the IDF embarked on several such operations in reaction to repeated escalations by Hezbollah. The main IDF course of action in these operations was attacking the infrastructure that served Hezbollah, such as bridges and local electrical transformers, and using aerial reconnaissance to hunt for rocket launchers. Ground forces were used mainly for special missions, and were massed on the border as a threat to escalate the operation.

In this atmosphere, a new Israeli concept was created for fighting guerrilla and terrorist organizations. A conscious and systematic attempt was made to minimize ground fighting in order to reduce the cost of the war, directing airstrikes against small groups of fighters and enemy infrastructure. This concept would not bring decisive victory, but it did exact a painful price on Hezbollah, and created periods of relative calm in the long war of attrition in Lebanon.

The withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000 was accompanied by an official Israeli statement asserting that further provocations from Hezbollah would bring about an Israeli reaction unprecedented in its severity. However, this threat was not substantiated until 2006, despite Hezbollah's repeated attacks, in the years between the withdrawal and the Second Lebanon War, against both Israeli civilians and military targets. Both of this strategy's essential pillars—specific intelligence on Hezbollah targets in Lebanon, and the willingness to attack them in retaliation for any Hezbollah strike—were called into question. Israel developed an aspirational strategy that combined the policy of separation, the pursuit of international legitimacy for the new border, and an attempt to deter the enemy using the IDF's superiority in intelligence and attack capabilities.

Indeed, Hezbollah's success in using rockets to provoke Israel to withdraw from Lebanon was a catalyst for Hamas's concept that firing rockets at Israeli civilian populations would promote its own goals. The 2005 Gaza disengagement can be understood in this context. From its experience in southern Lebanon, Israel realized that it would be unable to win the war of attrition in the

Strip. Hamas, meanwhile, learned from the Hezbollah experience that rockets were a powerful tool to pressure Israel to withdraw from territory.

The combination of these factors pushed the Israeli government to embark on a unilateral initiative to delegitimize Palestinian resistance.

In assessing the series of IDF operations in the Gaza Strip since the disengagement, one may conclude that their main element is indeed attacking Hamas targets and hunting small rocket-launch teams. In Operation Cast Lead, IDF ground forces were introduced only after an entire week of standoff engagements. If Hamas had stopped the fighting that week, Israel would have avoided the ground incursion, as it did in 2012. Also, when ground forces were utilized in January 2009 in Cast Lead, the move was intended to augment pressure on Hamas from the aerial attacks. Israel's decision to avoid entering the heart of Gaza supports this conclusion.

The development of active defense against rockets was a necessity, according to Israeli thinking. In wars characterized by standoff fires, an important advantage can be achieved not only from offensive capabilities but also from the ability to neutralize the effectiveness of the adversary's attack. This is exactly the point the IDF reached on the eve of Operation Protective Edge.

However, as stated earlier, Hamas also recognized this and developed in the years leading up to 2014 its new offensive method based on attack tunnels. On conceptual and technological levels, Israel had failed over several decades to deal with the challenge posed by the tunnels. Eventually, using knowledge accumulated on the ground by lower-ranking officers, the commander of the Gaza Division and the author of this paper identified the developing threat beginning in 2013. The author was struck by the caliber of the threat and the lack of Israel's response capability, and thus its ability to protect its citizens.

Here was the worst nightmare of any commander: the knowledge that women, children, and entire families were threatened with slaughter in their homes by terrorist groups. Protecting civilians is the topmost goal of an Israeli force meant to defend. Therefore, while no perfect solution to the problem was evident, in the months preceding Protective Edge, Southern Command began developing an emergency plan centered on the tunnel threat. Toward this goal, a huge Israeli force, almost a division, was diverted from offensive missions to defen-

sive assignments around the border. Additionally, an idea emerged whereby the ground attack would attempt to locate and destroy the tunnels, an effort only possible on the Palestinian side; this was the case because Israel had information on the Gaza tunnel entrances, but not on their end points in Israel and under which communities they were situated. Since the tunnels presented a direct threat to Israeli civilians, locating and destroying them became a priority. In assessing the threat, Israel understood that the gains of hitting Hamas targets in the Gaza Strip paled in comparison to the damage Hamas could do to Israeli communities through attacks using the tunnels.

### *Protective Edge and the Clash of Emerging Concepts*

It would be wrong to see in Operation Protective Edge just one encounter among many between the competitive strategic and operational logics of Israel and Hamas. To the contrary, on both sides, the summer 2014 operation witnessed several landmark developments.

The Israeli defensive system designed to fend off rocket attacks, debuted less than two years earlier during Operation Pillar of Defense, had now matured into a respectable array featuring nine Iron Dome batteries that protected most threatened areas in Israel. On the Palestinian side, new concepts were developed as well, alongside existing concepts such as rocket attacks on Israeli civilians and the urban basing of its territorial units. For Hamas, the real innovation entailed special forces raids using the underground infrastructure and sea routes. In addition to offensive tunnels extending into Israel, Hamas developed defensive tunnels inside Gaza from which its fighters could ambush invading forces. Also, before the operation, Hamas had established concepts meant to penetrate Iron Dome, but in this effort it failed. Here, it must be noted that the Israeli feat of defending against Hamas rockets is not necessarily transferable to Hezbollah in the north, whose missiles pose a set of challenges greater by an order of magnitude.

One overall shift during Protective Edge involved a pattern whereby both sides attacked and defended simultaneously, using both ground forces and strategic bombardment capabilities. This was a first. Moreover, until 2014 Israel had enjoyed exclusivity in ground offensive capabilities, and therefore had limited need to invest in this domain (see figure 4).

Protective Edge also saw violence between the antagonists rise to an entirely new level. From Gaza into Israel, more than 4,500 rockets and mortar shells were launched during the operation, 250 of which hit inhabited areas despite Iron Dome. Hamas also conducted seven raids into Israeli territory, four of them from the tunnels.<sup>5</sup> Israel, for its part, attacked more than 6,000 targets in the Strip, many of them in support of ground forces encountering intense resistance. More than 70 were killed on the Israeli side, including six civilians and a four-year-old boy. The injury count reached 600, including 130 civilians.

On the Palestinian side, around 2,000 were killed, out of which the IDF identified by name at least 798 confirmed Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad terrorists and 350 unnamed suspected terrorists. The fifty-one-day campaign was a long one when set against other recent Israeli fights. Operation Pillar of Defense lasted eight days, and the Second Lebanon War, seen in Israel as a lengthy engagement, lasted all of thirty-two days. Cast Lead, in 2009, spanned only twenty-five days.

Because of the new concepts employed during Protective Edge, as well as the intensity of the fighting, the confrontation was formative for both Israel and Hamas. As such, analyzing the successes and shortcomings from both sides can help inform Israeli preparations for the next military encounter.

### *What Worked in Protective Edge?*

The operation was successful for Israel in a number of strategic areas.

**AERIAL DEFENSE.** During the operation, Iron Dome proved itself the world's best protective system against rockets, intercepting close to 750 Hamas launches on a trajectory to hit populated Israeli areas. This defensive effort thwarted a Hamas plan to demonstrate its might by paralyzing civilian life in all major Israeli cities, harming many civilians, and wreaking large-scale damage. Instead, Hamas was dismayed to watch live broadcasts from Israel showing that Israelis had adjusted to the "alarm routine," and that the extent of the damage had not stirred widespread panic. Moreover, Hamas had evidently counted on Israeli reluctance to engage in a lengthy operation, another assumption in which it erred. Indeed, Israel acclimated itself to the constant rocket-fire, thanks to the Iron Dome defense, which allowed

the Israelis to take their time in the fight. In fact, it was Hamas that grew fatigued, eventually agreeing to a ceasefire without a single one of its initial ten demands met. Nor did Hamas, through its campaign, induce a deeper loss of morale among the Israeli population by degrading its perception of national might. The Israeli public showed impressive resilience and unity during the battle. In the Israeli collective memory of the confrontation, the threat of rockets does not hold a prominent position.

**GROUND DEFENSE.** As described earlier, Israel adjusted its defense tactics to the threat posed by elite Hamas forces performing ground raids in Israeli territory. Thus, on the eve of the operation, Southern Command decided that a division would protect the border and adjacent areas through combining forces and creating an additional supporting unit for monitoring and intelligence. The idea was that as long as the IDF could not locate all the tunnels, a second line of defense would need to be implemented. With the additional division spread out across the Israeli side of the border, Hamas raid forces surfacing in Israel from a tunnel would find themselves tactically compromised, unable to move openly or threaten Israeli communities and other sensitive targets. Repeatedly during the operation, Hamas attempted to use the tunnels to ambush and kidnap Israelis for strategic leverage, recalling that Gilad Shalit had been exchanged for 1,027 Hamas militants. But here again, Israeli conceptual assessment of the threat, appropriate preparation, and the expertise of the implementing forces prevented all but one of the seven Hamas raid forces from even conducting an attack against Israeli forces before returning to Gaza. Even the lone raid, meanwhile, did not yield an abduction. IDF forces encountered four additional raid forces, three of which they destroyed while chasing away the fourth. The Hamas tunnels did manage to sow fear among the 20,000 inhabitants of the Israeli border communities. Nevertheless, four years of investment in the tunnel infrastructure and training of raid forces failed to gain any substantive victory for Hamas.

**MANEUVER TO THE SHAFT LINE.** The Israeli attack on Gaza was a defensive action, in response to Hamas rocket launches, that was also meant as a deterrent measure. The inability to detect the tunnel shafts in Israel proper at the outset of the operation forced the IDF to

target the tunnel entrances on the Palestinian side, using prior intelligence on their whereabouts. Within Gaza, ten brigades spread out around the border area were assigned the task of searching for tunnel entrances in order to trace their route back into Israel and destroy them. In this manner, thirty-two tunnels were destroyed. Even though this action took more than four weeks to complete, the IDF presence prevented Hamas infiltration units from even attempting to enter the shafts and eliminated tunnels that been constructed over years, before the militants even had a chance to use them. At the end of the operation, Hamas was forced to begin reconstructing these tunnels completely anew.

The tunnel system was the top-priority military investment for Hamas, yet it produced no strategic or tactical victories. While Hamas built the system to surprise Israeli forces, the IDF in turn surprised Hamas forces by deploying ground forces inside Gaza to destroy the tunnels. Prior to the operation, Hamas had assessed that the IDF would employ measures similar to those it had taken during Cast Lead—i.e., encircling Gaza City and focusing all its operations in the heart of the Strip, thereby leaving the border areas unmanned and allowing Hamas operatives to enter the tunnel shafts unnoticed. Instead, the IDF surprised Hamas with a completely different approach, neutralizing the group's most valuable asset and devastating its expectations. The IDF, further, far exceeded its predictions regarding the number of tunnels it would destroy. Protective Edge thus gave IDF invaluable experience for confronting Hamas tunnels in the future, potentially marking the beginning of the end of the subterranean threat.

**THE DETERRENCE APPROACH.** Israeli strategy seeks a single objective: lengthy periods of quiet between violence with its neighbors with whom reconciliation is impossible. According to this logic, Operation Protective Edge was not meant to end the "Hamastan" regime or defeat its military power. The summer campaign was rather intended to stop the immediate threat to Israel's home front, to neutralize the subterranean threat, and to create deterrence sufficient to provide Israel with another lengthy period of quiet. So far, three-and-a-half years after the operation, Hamas has not hurried to reactivate its military power as a strategic bargaining tool against Israel, despite the economic distress and international isolation in which it has found itself. Furthermore, Hamas actively prevents many attacks by

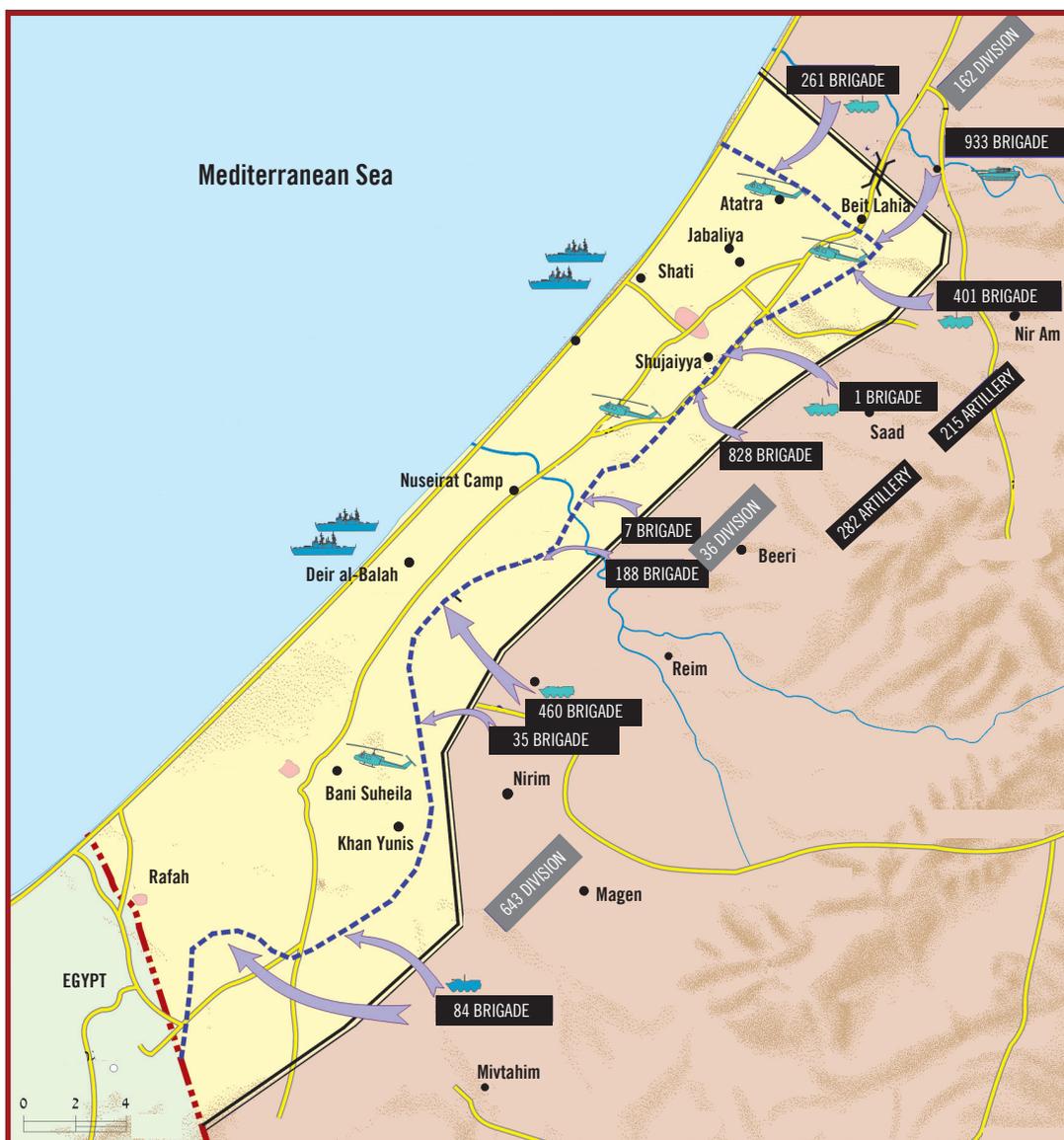


FIGURE 4: OPERATION PROTECTIVE EDGE

other terrorist groups against Israel, and even detains and punishes those who attempt such attacks, out of a fear that such attacks could drag the group into another confrontation—a testament to IDF deterrence. Separately, Hamas did not complete the rehabilitation of its forces, and probably does not feel that the system of offensive tunnels and the rocket infrastructure have been sufficiently restored. The agreed ceasefire, as already noted, did not comply with the Hamas terms set forth in August 2014. In the realm of morale, the post-operation narrative promoted by Hamas, positing a successful battle full of achievements, did not catch on with the Gaza public. Indeed, a deep dissonance prevailed between this attempt to create a sunny nar-

rative and the utter devastation of the Strip; in a confrontation that was supposed to make life better for Gazans, they instead found conditions worse in every conceivable way. Nor does continued Hamas possession of partial Israeli soldiers' remains change the picture significantly.

The prewar reality of a low-grade border war between Hamas and the IDF has also shifted. In 2012, the organization dared to launch antitank missiles toward a school bus in Israeli territory, severely injuring one student. The incident was accompanied by the firing of mortar shells into Israeli territory. Altogether, until Pillar of Defense, Hamas would provoke IDF forces across the border fence through shooting incidents or

the near-weekly placement of roadside bombs. These provocations disappeared completely following Protective Edge. The conclusion can thus be made that the overall demonstration of Israeli power in summer 2014 achieved the minimal goal of deterring Hamas and significantly changing the security situation and everyday reality surrounding the Gaza Strip.

### **What Did Not Work?**

Despite the Israeli successes, analysis shows various areas for improvement.

**CRACKS IN DEFENSE OF THE HOME FRONT.** In response to Iron Dome's feat of shooting down 90 percent of the rockets that threatened Israeli communities, Hamas was compelled to adjust in several areas. The first was through the firing of short-range rockets and mortar shells, against which Iron Dome was not designed to defend. During Operation Protective Edge, this meant vulnerability for the communities and IDF units based near the border. Alongside the lack of protection against short-range fires, those in targeted areas received only seconds of warning time to take shelter before the moment of impact. A significant portion of the Israeli injuries during the operation occurred due to such deficits in Israeli defense mechanisms, as well as to insufficiently professional behavior by some soldiers.

Added to the tactical inability to respond to short-range launches was intense stress experienced by area residents, who were already coping with the menace posed by the offensive tunnels. Not only did Israeli citizens in these areas have to deal with the constant alarms, leaving only seconds to take shelter, they also had absorbed the bone-chilling prospect of a Hamas operative pushing up through the floorboards of their living room, and attacking them in their own home. The scale of the psychological burden is not difficult to imagine.

Second, the alarms themselves, Hamas came to understand during the operation, constituted an effective means of psychological warfare. As a result, Hamas began to intentionally launch missile barrages in the evening as families gathered to listen to the daily news, during nighttime to disrupt their sleep, and in the morning while families were getting ready for school and work. Hamas acted this way in order to wear down

the Israeli psyche and restrict freedom of movement in Israeli daily life. In this, the group achieved some success, including, if only modestly, in major population centers such as Tel Aviv.

Third, Hamas hindered freedom of movement to and from Israel by consistently attacking the country's main port, in Ashdod, and its only international airport, Ben Gurion, near Tel Aviv. Even though all the rockets were shot down, the alarms set off in the airport created stresses. Indeed, when the attacks were at a peak, several international aviation companies announced their plans to stop flights to Ben Gurion. These announcements involved only a few airlines, and they were reversed within a day, but the incident clearly illustrated a threat to the Israeli economy. By extension, observers noted the broader consequences of attacks on a strategic target within Israel. Because Israel is both very small and highly modern, a strike on particular pressure points, including power stations, natural gas facilities, essential military locations, and communication towers, can truly paralyze the country, while causing long-term damage. This explains why the acquisition of precision weapons by Hezbollah or Hamas is a redline for Israel on which it will act.

**COMPLEXITIES OF LAND BATTLE.** Israel's limited ground offensive into Gaza was effective, as explained earlier, in neutralizing the tunnel system, the most concrete and immediate threat posed by Hamas to Israel. Moreover, every unit in the operation showed courage and determination when faced with the difficulties and complexities of Gaza. Here, the author must pause to express his admiration and gratitude for those who risked their lives and made great personal sacrifice to maintain Israel's security. He hopes the bodies of 1st Sgt. Oron Shaul and Lt. Hadar Goldin will be returned to their loved ones.

Yet Hamas also derived advantage from the well-developed tunnel system and the fight amid familiar urban terrain, allowing the group to harm a large number of Israeli soldiers. More important, despite sustaining significant personnel losses—about 1,000 of its 30,000 fighters—most Hamas combatants survived, permitting the group to persist militarily and maintain its political grip on Gaza.

**STRATEGIC STATUS QUO.** Despite a general pull-back from instigation against Israel along the bor-

der, Hamas did not, following the ceasefire, change either its declared military policy or its strategic concept, which holds that resistance to Israel is not only an ideology but also a means to unify the public and maintain control. Thus, the rhetorical and policy-based facts governing the Israel-Hamas relationship remained unchanged. Nor did the conflict spur an economic or political initiative to reconstruct Gaza or create opportunity in the dead-end territory, a pressure cooker of 1.8 million people without any economic base or ability to sustain itself in terms of basic infrastructure, water, and electricity. The reconciliation effort between the PA and Hamas is nothing but an empty political initiative, with no real chance of success. Even if it does succeed, it will have little impact on the reality of daily life in Gaza.

On the military components of the relationship—the focus of this paper—Hamas concluded that its strategy was not up to date. The group thus continues to plan and build tunnels for both offensive and defensive purposes—adapting to the development of IDF capabilities against the tunnels—as well as to store its missile array. Further, in continuing to develop its rocket system, the group has moved even further toward self-production in response to the tightening Israeli and Egyptian siege on Gaza. To prepare for the next war, Hamas is also improving the abilities of its elite Nukhba units, so that they can deal effective blows in combination with missile fire.

Altogether, notwithstanding the high level of violence, the extent of the effort, and the resources invested, Operation Protective Edge did not significantly change the strategic dynamic between Hamas and Israel. It did, however, succeed in deterring Hamas and creating a lengthy period of quiet, which was not disrupted even after the October 2017 IDF destruction of an offensive tunnel and resultant deaths of fourteen operatives<sup>6</sup>—a clear sign of Israeli deterrence. Notwithstanding these successes, many more confrontations will occur in the future.

### *Imagining the Next Confrontation*

Hamas's failure to show any substantial victories following Operation Protective Edge—either through real military success as measured by harm to the Israeli home front or through improving the situation in Gaza—suggests the group will initiate another confrontation only

when it feels ready and has reason to believe it can achieve tangible goals.

Indeed, past examples indicate Hamas will be better prepared next time. The group has demonstrated an ability to thoroughly analyze operations, draw trenchant conclusions, and develop new plans accordingly. The dramatic improvement in its operational concept from Cast Lead to Pillar of Defense to Protective Edge strongly suggests that this trend will continue, and that Hamas will continue deftly adjusting to IDF capabilities.

Such adaptations, however, are not likely to entail a drastic change in Hamas's military concept, which allows the group to successfully exert power against Israel during wartime without risking its rule over the Gaza Strip. Moreover, the Hamas operational concept will continue to be guided by an interest in rattling Israel's self-confidence by

- moving a substantial portion of the battlefield into Israeli territory through rocketfire and the use of subterranean warfare for infiltration of special forces into Israel,
- showing Israel that any IDF maneuver into Gaza will incur a high price in soldiers' lives, given Hamas's use of subterranean warfare and territorial units in urban areas,
- attempting to surprise Israel by acquiring a bargaining chip, such as a kidnapped soldier, or attacking an Israeli community near the border,
- trying to create an environment in which Israel feels attacked on all fronts, thereby activating dormant units in the West Bank and Sinai, and preventing the IDF from focusing its attention on Gaza alone, and
- initiating the confrontation with a meaningful tactical achievement, such as opening the siege on Gaza, releasing Hamas prisoners, or opening a naval port, that it believes can be leveraged into a strategic achievement.

**FUTURE FIREPOWER.** In seeking to maximize the number of Israeli civilian casualties in a conflict, Hamas will operate based on

- challenging the Israeli active-defense system by targeting populated areas deep in Israeli territory, which will not be covered by the Iron Dome batteries,

- firing rocket salvos,
- targeting Israeli communities adjacent to the Gaza border with short-range missiles, to which Israel does not have an adequate defensive response,
- enhancing its precision capabilities to approach the level of precise missiles, and
- increasing the deadliness and thus potential damage each rocket can do.

**FUTURE OF SUBTERRANEAN WARFARE.** Operation Protective Edge was a watershed moment. Prior to the operation, Hamas enjoyed complete freedom in its subterranean domain, which was seemingly impenetrable to the IDF. The operation demonstrated to Hamas the vulnerability of the tunnel infrastructure that penetrates Israeli territory. The recent tunnel demolitions by the Israel Defense Forces, and Israel's intention to create obstacles to future subterranean development, will force Hamas to adjust its concept with regard to the tunnels.

In attempting to overcome this challenge, Hamas will likely maintain a small number of tunnels that penetrate into Israeli territory, and will focus its resources on building defensive fighting tunnels within the Strip. The inevitable significance of this strategy will be a Hamas attempt to drag the IDF into the Strip, thereby channeling Israeli maneuver during the confrontation. Further, Hamas will, as noted, seek tactical achievements and potential strategic leverage through moves such as the kidnapping of a soldier.

**DEVELOPMENT OF SPECIAL FORCES CAPABILITIES.** Hamas is working to increase the size and capability of every brigade in its Nukhba units, in order to carry out offensive operations deep into Israeli territory, and in Gaza itself during periods of conflict—and to acquire the earlier-discussed bargaining chip. Furthermore, Hamas is developing an advanced naval commando force in every one of its brigades, built of thirty to fifty militants, which will be used to launch raids into Israeli territory and along the coast, in pursuit of different strategic, security, and economic targets. Finally, Hamas has begun to employ suicide drones, each carrying a small amount of explosive. Hamas will attempt to use these drones to attack strategic targets within Israeli territory.

## *What Happens from Here?*

From one perspective, Operation Protective Edge was a watershed; from another, it was nothing but a moment in a slow-motion train wreck. Since the conflict, as already established, both sides have continued to build their forces exactly as before: on the Hamas side, rockets, tunnels, and raiding forces; on the Israeli side, defense technology to counter the offensive tunnels, strengthening of the active-defense system against rockets, intelligence enhancement, airstrikes, and the bolstering of advanced maneuver and conquering capabilities. Given this continuity, and the maintenance of existing military concepts on both sides, one has every reason to believe the next confrontation will largely mirror the last—only it will be stronger, more advanced, and potentially more violent.

The Israeli leadership, for its part, appears to be attempting to address this seemingly endless cycle of violence. In a few planned and well-worded declarations, Minister of Defense Avigdor Liberman made clear that the next confrontation in Gaza will also be the end of Hamas rule. While this statement suggests an Israeli willingness to break the unhappy status quo in the territory, an Israeli conquest of Gaza would undoubtedly mark another dead end, only of a different kind.

Separately, different developmental initiatives for Gaza appear from time to time, including from Israeli cabinet members. These leaders understand the possible connection between the welfare of Gaza citizens and its government, and the scale of Hamas radicalism. Nonetheless, these measures tend to stall at the political level. The PA, meanwhile, is threatened by Hamas attempts to undermine its authority, a dynamic that ultimately ends up blocking development initiatives or international aid to Hamas and the hard-pressed Gazans. Here, the sense is that any sign of welfare or prosperity under Hamas-ruled Gaza will boost the Islamist group, thereby threatening PA stability in the West Bank. Also, in the Arab world, the central Sunni players, to which the Palestinians belong, are united in their quest to eradicate any support for the Muslim Brotherhood, a group that strives to undermine area governments. The Arab boycott against Qatar, beginning in summer 2017, represents an especially stark public showing of this rift. Deducing from these trends, the Israeli leadership should not believe the Gaza problem will be solved by any political initiative, at least not in the near future.

Palestinian reconciliation efforts, or the lack thereof, showcase the inevitable impasse.

Given these realities, and setting aside nonmilitary components of the problem, Israel's military leadership must strive to achieve a new level of capability to break the current deadlock. If it succeeds, such an operational idea can certainly be transported to Israel's foremost battlefield—the very birthplace of these types of confrontations—Lebanon.

## Notes

1. Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Victims of Palestinian Violence and Terrorism since September 2000," <http://washin.st/2oscVxD>.
2. Grant Rumley and Amir Tibon, *The Last Palestinian: The Rise and Reign of Mahmoud Abbas* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2017), p. 126.
3. Steven Weisman, "Rice Admits U.S. Underestimated Hamas Strength," *New York Times*, January 30, 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/30/world/middleeast/rice-admits-us-underestimated-hamas-strength.html>.
4. As can be seen in the 2007–2008 data in figure 1, and from IDF personnel on security assignments on the Gaza border.
5. These consist of four raids from the tunnels, two aerial raid attempts, and one Hamas commando raid on the beach adjacent to Ashkelon, in Israel.
6. Maj. Gen. (Res.) Shlomo "Sami" Turjeman, "Demolition of a Palestinian Islamic Jihad Tunnel inside Israel," PolicyWatch 2887 (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, November 3, 2017), <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/demolition-of-a-palestinian-islamic-jihad-tunnel-inside-israel>.



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