Managing Escalation in Gaza (Part 1): Lessons from Operation Protective Edge

by Nadav Ben Hour **(/experts/nadav-ben-hour)**

Jul 26, 2018
Also available in
العربية (/ar/policy-analysis/althkm-baltsyd-fy-ghzt-aljz-alawl-aldrwsun-almstfadt-mn-mlyt-aljrf-alsamd)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Nadav Ben Hour (/experts/nadav-ben-hour)

Nadav Ben Hour is a visiting military fellow with The Washington Institute and a major in the Israel Defense Forces.

Brief Analysis

The 2014 conflict showed how escalatory dynamics can quickly lead two adversaries into full-blown fighting even when neither side actually wants a war.

This PolicyWatch is the first in a two-part series on the latest hostilities in the Gaza Strip. ***Read (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/managing-escalation-in-gaza-part-2-breaking-the-dynamic)*** *Part 2* ***(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/managing-escalation-in-gaza-part-2-breaking-the-dynamic)*** *, which focuses on analysis of the current situation there.*

In recent weeks, tensions between Hamas and Israel have escalated significantly and the security situation in Gaza has deteriorated rapidly. Tensions are at their highest since the conclusion of Operation Protective Edge in summer 2014, which ushered in four years of relative quiet. Thus far, traumatic memories of that operation have seemingly deterred Hamas from another major conflict with Israel, much as memories of the 2006 Lebanon war have deterred Hezbollah. But the nature and scope of recent confrontations have raised concerns that escalation dynamics could lead to another Gaza conflict, the fourth in the past decade alone.

THE ROAD TO OPERATION PROTECTIVE EDGE

The 2014 conflict was even more serious than previous confrontations between the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and Hamas. Yet it was not planned or initiated by either party; rather, it was the result of a military action-reaction dynamic that spiraled out of control.

Several factors contributed to this spiral: the kidnapping and murder of Israeli youths, rocket fire from Gaza by rogue activists, and each side's fear that the other would initiate a broader conflict. The economic crisis in the Strip contributed to these tensions but was not the reason for the escalation. The current dynamic bears some similarities to 2014, though there are also many important differences, including the fact that both sides have incorporated

lessons from the previous round into their calculations and actions.

The origins of the previous conflict can be traced to Operation Pillar of Defense in November 2012. That eight-day Israeli campaign in Gaza ended when Egyptian president Mohamed Morsi helped Hamas conclude a deal to partially open the border crossings with Israel and expand the area available to Gazans for fishing.

After the operation, the group continued to build up its arms stockpiles and prepare for a future confrontation by producing rockets and digging offensive tunnels for infiltrating its forces into Israel. In the meantime, Hamas refrained from firing rockets and restrained other terrorist organizations from taking similar steps.

The situation changed in July 2013 when Morsi was ousted by Gen. Abdul Fattah al-Sisi, who adopted a hostile attitude toward the group. The Sisi government's posture, among other factors, helped create a severe political and economic crisis for Hamas from which it has yet to recover.

Afterward, the group tried to maintain its policy of calm, believing that a confrontation would further worsen its situation. Its leaders even feared that Israel might initiate a war to exploit the group's weakness; for their part, many Israelis feared that Hamas might spark a conflict to gain concessions that would improve its economic situation. In any case, the effort to maintain was only partially successful. Rogue elements fired rockets at Israel from time to time, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad led a short escalation in March 2014.

But the most proximate cause of Operation Protective Edge was the kidnapping and murder of three Israeli teenagers in the West Bank on June 12 of that year, carried out by a local Hamas cell that was apparently acting on its own initiative. Israel responded by launching a massive search operation, rolling up Hamas cells and institutions in the West Bank, and arresting Hamas members who had been released in the Gilad Shalit prisoner exchange of 2011.

These events inspired rogue Gaza operatives to fire rockets in solidarity with the West Bank. Israel responded by attacking the sources of fire and various Hamas sites in Gaza. Even so, the group continued its policy of maintaining calm and trying to restrain other militants, though it became increasingly frustrated by IDF strikes and fearful of a wider offensive.

On June 29, for the first time since Operation Pillar of Defense, the IDF killed a Hamas operative suspected of preparing to launch rockets. The group responded by firing twelve short-range rockets, the first time it had done so since 2012. The IDF then intensified its attacks in order to deter continued fire, while Hamas launched dozens more rockets to deter Israel.

Meanwhile, the IDF learned of plans for a possible Hamas tunnel attack from southern Gaza into Israel. On July 5-6, IDF units took action against the tunnel; the next day, six Hamas members were killed when the tunnel collapsed on them. The group quickly retaliated by firing around forty longer-range rockets as far as 40 kilometers, which led Israel to attack dozens of Hamas targets and announce the start of Operation Protective Edge. The next day, Hamas launched rockets at Tel Aviv.

After several days of fighting, the group submitted its conditions for a ceasefire, which focused on "lifting the siege" through measures such as building a seaport and airport for Gaza. Yet the conflict dragged on, and after fifty days of hostilities—including a ground campaign to demolish offensive tunnels—Hamas accepted an Egyptian-brokered ceasefire without having realized any of its demands. Instead, it settled for renewal of the terms that had ended the previous operation.

LESSONS AND INSIGHTS

As asymmetric confrontations go, Operation Protective Edge was a relatively clear victory for the IDF, ending on terms favorable to Israel and strengthening its deterrence. Yet it came at the cost of more than seventy Israelis

killed and seven weeks of fighting that included daily fire into the center of Israel. Officials should therefore draw lessons from the lead-up to Protective Edge, which offers insight on managing escalation and preventing an unwanted war.

Intentions vs. dynamics. The 2014 confrontation demonstrated that in some circumstances, an adversary's intentions may be less important than the dynamics shaping the conflict's trajectory. That is, Hamas and Israel may not want a confrontation, but they might stumble into one anyway due to the momentum of events on the ground. Accordingly, analysts should engage in "back-casting": that is, postulating worst-case outcomes and then imagining possible paths to them in order to devise ways of averting them.

Tactical developments with strategic impact. Analysts and decisionmakers should keep in mind that escalatory processes may be very rapid, limiting each side's ability to influence them. The road to Protective Edge was repeatedly shaped by seemingly isolated local incidents that had a dramatic impact on the strategic situation, giving planners little time to consider whether and how to deescalate.

The role of spoilers. Hamas still controls Gaza, but not completely. The territory is characterized by competition between various armed groups with often-conflicting interests. As a result, they often attempt to outdo or undermine each other, leading to actions that can feed the escalatory dynamic with Israel.

Looking beyond economics. Many see Gaza's economic situation as the main cause for escalation. Yet this was not the case before Operation Protective Edge: in 2014, Hamas did not believe another confrontation would improve Gaza's situation, and the conflict erupted due to an action-reaction dynamic between each side's armed forces. Economic problems of course exacerbated local tensions, but their influence was mainly felt after the operation began, when Hamas submitted ceasefire terms that focused on "lifting the siege." Moreover, previous confrontations occurred even when Gaza's economic situation was significantly better.

Today, Gaza's economic and humanitarian plight is an important driver of escalation, spurring the "Great March of Return"—a Hamas effort to draw attention to the Strip's dire conditions and demonstrate the costs of maintaining the status quo by prodding protestors to cross the border. Even so, security considerations and military actions will still be the main drivers of any future war, and there is no guarantee that ameliorating the economic situation will diminish those drivers and produce calm. After all, many of the security-related problems that contributed to past conflicts existed before Gaza's drastic humanitarian downslide and persist today. These include: constant military friction along the frontier (e.g., terrorists targeting Israeli border forces with improvised explosive devices, leading the IDF to conduct shallow incursions and other preventive measures); tensions between smaller militant groups in Gaza; steady Hamas force buildup (including tunnel construction); and the fact that two Israeli citizens remain in Hamas custody, along with the remains of two IDF soldiers.

That said, taking steps to alleviate the humanitarian and economic crisis is a very important goal that is worth pursuing. This is true not just for moral reasons, but also because it can help ease tensions, eliminate a driver of escalation, and prevent the spread of disease and pollution from Gaza.

Escalating to deescalate. In 2014, both Hamas and Israel sought to deescalate the crisis through escalatory steps such as increased air and rocket strikes, presumably hoping that firm action would deter the other side. Instead, however, this approach contributed to the outbreak of Operation Protective Edge. And while that conflict bought four years of relative quiet, it is worth considering whether a similar approach might foment an even more serious conflict this time around—and whether more years of quiet is truly the most probable outcome of major fighting given current circumstances.

Mutual distrust. In 2014, each side assumed the worst about the other; conciliatory public messages were interpreted as attempts to deceive, and messages via indirect channels were greeted with skepticism. These mutual

suspicions helped pave the way to Operation Protective Edge and made it difficult to break out of the escalatory spiral.

Both sides also found it difficult to distinguish between defensive and offensive actions. For instance, Israel's decision to target a tunnel before Hamas could use it to cross the border was an isolated mission planned apart from Protective Edge, but Hamas seemingly viewed it as the start of a wider campaign against its forces. Likewise, the group apparently believed that the defensive buildup of IDF units near Gaza indicated offensive intent.

In general, when uncertainty about an adversary's intentions prevails and the costs of misinterpretation are high, each side tends to adopt a more skeptical view of every action. This process almost invariably ratchets up tensions and increases the potential for miscalculation.

Messaging and deterrence. Protective Edge also highlighted the tension between "strategic clarity" (i.e., clear communication of one's intentions) and deterrence. On the one hand, neither side wants its intentions to be misunderstood, since that could inadvertently escalate a conflict. On the other hand, forthrightly communicating one's desire to avoid war might undermine deterrence by convincing the other side that it can act provocatively without fear of escalation. Conversely, tough messages intended to strengthen deterrence might exacerbate tensions and lead to unwanted escalation. Striking the right balance between these opposing impulses is difficult, but Israel will need to find it in order to keep a lid on the current situation.

CONCLUSION

The main lesson from Operation Preventive Edge is that there is no single solution for preventing unwanted confrontation in Gaza when so many factors are perpetuating a state of near-constant tension between Israel and Hamas. Hopefully, keeping a close eye on all of the factors and escalatory dynamics currently at play can help reduce the potential for a conflict that neither side wants. Part 2 of this PolicyWatch will analyze how these factors and the lessons of 2014 apply to the present situation, with the aim of raising general ideas for improving it.

Maj. Nadav Ben Hour, IDF, is a visiting military fellow with The Washington Institute. ❖

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis

Feb 14, 2022

◆

Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)

BRIEF ANALYSIS

The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven

Feb 14, 2022

◆

Sana Quadri,
Hamdullah Baycar

(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven)

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Facing Syria's Food Crisis

Feb 14, 2022

◆

Ishtar Al Shami

(/policy-analysis/facing-syrias-food-crisis)

TOPICS

- Arab-Israeli Relations (/policy-analysis/arab-israeli-relations)
- Military & Security (/policy-analysis/military-security)
- Peace Process (/policy-analysis/peace-process)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

- Israel (/policy-analysis/israel)
- Palestinians (/policy-analysis/palestinians)