

Operational Wisdom amid Strategic Distress

by [Alon Paz \(/experts/alon-paz\)](#), [Nadav Pollak \(/experts/nadav-pollak\)](#)

Jul 21, 2014

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Alon Paz \(/experts/alon-paz\)](#)

Lt. Col. Alon Paz, IDF, was a 2014 visiting military fellow at The Washington Institute.



[Nadav Pollak \(/experts/nadav-pollak\)](#)

Nadav Pollak is a former Diane and Guilford Glazer Foundation fellow at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

To prepare for future asymmetric conflicts, Israel and other countries will need to examine Hamas's adaptation to Israel's fighting doctrine.

The current confrontation between Israel and Hamas could look at first glance like merely another military round between the two sides. However, a number of major differences, especially regarding Hamas's regional isolation, its decade-long force buildup, and its development of military strategy and tactics, distinguish Israel's Operation Protective Edge from past operations. Although it might be too early to derive strategic conclusions from the current operation, certain key points can already be noted as lessons for the future. Moreover, as other regional terror organizations seek to learn from this conflict, the task of analyzing Hamas's actions from day one becomes even more crucial.

Political Isolation

Before Protective Edge began, Hamas was in a dire situation politically, financially, and logistically. To begin with, more than 40,000 Gaza public workers had not received their salaries in months, and the reconciliation process with Fatah had failed to move forward on substantial issues. Moreover, since evacuating its offices in Damascus, the organization had been cut off from Iranian support. And Hamas's most important ally in recent years, Egypt's Mohamed Morsi-led government, had been replaced by the regime of Abdul Fattah al-Sisi, no friend of the Brotherhood. More specifically, Sisi's anti-tunnels campaign had crippled Hamas's ability to maintain the free flow of money, goods, and weapons into Gaza.

Alongside these challenges, Hamas's public support has declined significantly, as revealed in a recent Washington

Institute survey. Correspondingly, the organization's military leadership deemed the military option the only way to break the status quo and retain financial and political support. Hamas did not start firing rockets only to wrest concessions from Israel, but did so equally to pressure Egypt and Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas indirectly through Israel. One of Hamas's primary goals is to open the Rafah crossing, allowing money and commodities to flow into Gaza and thereby improving its political support. According to Hamas's calculations, negotiation by arms was the group's only option.

Operational Wisdom

In the current round of fighting, Hamas has demonstrated improvements in three broad military dimensions. The first involves taking the initiative. This move has benefited Hamas immensely, by implicitly preventing Israel from launching an efficient surprise first strike. Indeed, the Israeli Air Force's (IAF's) first-strike capability has proved a key characteristic of Israel's recent operational successes. In Operation Cast Lead, in winter 2008-2009, Israel's first strike, lasting 3:40 minutes, killed a third of all the militants killed during the entire operation. In Operation Pillar of Defense, in November 2012, Israel's first strike eliminated most of Hamas's long-range rockets. An early strike during Pillar of Defense also killed Hamas military commander Ahmed Jabari. This time, Hamas's military wing seems to have been prepared for an Israeli counterstrike. The military leaders went underground, logistical units ensured that valuable assets were protected, and the organization dug in for a protracted fight.

The second element displaying Hamas's growth from past confrontations involves its "rocket economy." Since the end of Pillar of Defense in late 2012, Hamas and other Gaza terror organizations have doubled their rocket arsenal, allowing some 120 rockets to be fired daily at various ranges. Indeed, Hamas has successfully surprised Israelis with its rockets' range -- namely, when its R-160 (a.k.a. the Syrian M-302 allegedly shipped by Iran) forced Israelis in the country's central and northern sections to head for their shelters. Firing this many rockets at varied targets allows Hamas to pursue three key objectives: (1) to subject as much of the Israeli population as possible to constant rocket fire; (2) to try to exceed the saturation point of the Iron Dome air-defense system through heavy barrages; (3) and to prove that Hamas can stand on its own feet in the fighting, even as Israel operates in Gaza.

Third, Israel's ground operation has slowly revealed Hamas's elaborate tunnel infrastructure. Thus far, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) has discovered dozens of tunnels two to three kilometers in length, with multiple shafts. Offensively, this tunnel system allows Hamas terrorists to infiltrate into Israel and attempt mass killings at kibbutzim. A second offensive purpose of the tunnels is in allowing Hamas units to outflank Israeli forces in and around Gaza, and to attack them from the rear -- a known military vulnerability. Defensively, the underground system within populated Gaza areas enables Hamas terrorists to move freely from post to post, evading IDF targeting. The tunnels thus make the organization more durable when fighting, while challenging the IDF's Gaza position.

Alongside its operational advances, Hamas has once again demonstrated the centrality of martyrdom to its military strategy and doctrine. Recently, a suicide bomber injured a number of IDF engineering soldiers when he blew himself up near an armored bulldozer. Furthermore, Hamas terrorist recruits sent across the Israeli border are well aware of their likely fate.

On the psychological level, Hamas has invested in propaganda and information operations aimed at creating an image of victory and new accomplishment. In an asymmetric war such as this one, the weaker side must magnify its accomplishments in order to persuade its domestic audience and supporters abroad of its successes. Such a feat was attained by Hezbollah through creative propaganda during the 2006 Lebanon war, helping dramatically propel support for the group in Arab countries. Hamas is following this model by trying to create images of groundbreaking military operations. Alongside the rocket and underground campaigns, such advances include flying a drone in Israeli airspace and various primitive cyber operations.

Finally, Hamas has demonstrated very effective command-and-control capabilities and resilience during this conflict. After two weeks of fighting, Hamas still seems able to maintain communication lines between rocket units, ground units, and military leadership, as evidenced by each entity's adherence to its operational plan -- with each plan prepared and practiced over years. Furthermore, Hamas successfully launched combined operations involving artillery and infiltration of ground forces into Israel.

What's Next?

When the operation invariably ends, Hamas will try to claim clear victory by emphasizing three elements: the success of its military "surprises" (e.g., long-range rockets, tunnels, drones/commando forces, cyber operations), its resilience during the operation, and its endurance against a more powerful and better-equipped enemy. In Hamas's view, such emphases will help regain political support from various actors and enhanced near-term logistical and financial support from outside actors, mainly Iran. Nevertheless, to date, Hamas's decision to initiate a confrontation with Israel seems to be incurring more political costs than benefits, as shown by Arab statements, especially from Egypt and Saudi Arabia, that Hamas should have agreed to the Egyptian ceasefire initiative.

To prepare for future asymmetric conflicts, Israel and other countries will need to examine Hamas's adaptation to Israel's fighting doctrine. The necessity of such study extends well beyond Hamas. Indeed, other terror organizations across continents -- from Hezbollah in Lebanon to Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria to ISIS in Iraq to Boko Haram in Nigeria -- all learn quickly, absorbing successful strategies through loose operational networks. They will be eager to draw lessons from Hamas's experience.

Despite its clever tactics and well-planned military strategy, Hamas still has insufficient fighting capabilities to match Israeli intelligence, and defensive and offensive capabilities, on the battlefield. Other terror organizations, however, do have substantial capabilities, and they will likely employ enhanced Hamas tactics in the future. For Israel, the United States, and their partners, preparing for such eventualities is a critical and urgent task.

Lt. Col. Alon Paz, Israel Defense Forces, is a Visiting Military Fellow at The Washington Institute. Nadav Pollak is a research associate at the Institute. ❖

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆
Grant Rumley

(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022



Anna Borshchevskaya

[\(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy\)](#)

TOPICS

[Military & Security \(/policy-analysis/military-security\)](#)

[Terrorism \(/policy-analysis/terrorism\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Israel \(/policy-analysis/israel\)](#)

[Palestinians \(/policy-analysis/palestinians\)](#)