

The Risks of Israel's Gaza Incursion

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Prior to the latest ground campaign in Gaza, Hamas appeared to be losing relevance and legitimacy, but Israel's offensive -- however justifiable -- could restore both.

While Israel has demonstrated enormous strategic patience with Hamas' over 1,500 rocket attacks, which sent some two-thirds of Israelis into bomb shelters, the potential cost to Israel of even a limited ground incursion in northern Gaza -- the death of more Palestinian civilians, the loss or kidnapping of Israeli soldiers, and a further erosion of Israel's international standing -- could be high.

Israel's land campaign military action is legally and morally justified. Even President Obama, who rarely misses an opportunity to demand more of Israeli than Palestinian officials, has endorsed Israel's right to defend itself by firing back and doing what was needed to destroy the network of tunnels that militants have used to infiltrate and attack Israelis. "No nation should accept rockets being fired into its borders or terrorists tunneling into its territory," Obama said at a press conference Friday.

Hamas has given Israel little choice but escalation. The terrorist organization that has ruled Gaza since seizing power in 2007 not only rejected a cease fire proposed by Egypt that Israel quickly accepted, but also violated a humanitarian pause in the rocket attacks called by the United Nations.

Israel's land invasion, with some of the almost 40,000 soldiers it has mobilized in recent weeks, was prompted Thursday when 13 armed Palestinian militants entered Israel through a tunnel with the apparent aim of attacking an

Israeli kibbutz less than a mile away.

Israel vows that its incursion will be limited to identifying and destroying the parts of the tunnel networks closest to Israel which cannot be detected and destroyed by air. But the campaign's goals are still somewhat vague, its mission ill-defined. What percentage of the Gaza tunnels does Israel intend to eliminate? How long will the campaign last? What cost is Israel willing to bear to accomplish its objectives? And most importantly, can Israel prevent Hamas from rebuilding whatever infrastructure Israeli soldiers and weapons destroy.

Spokesmen for United Nations groups and other members of the international community have already criticized Israel for its retaliatory air campaign, noting the disproportionate death toll -- one Israeli death, a heart attack victim, versus more than 200 Palestinians killed. Human rights organizations deplored Israel's killing of four Palestinian children on a roof earlier this week and three others playing on a Gaza beach. If history is any guide, as the ground offensive progresses -- and the number of civilians killed in the crossfire rises -- international censure of Israel will reach fever pitch.

Recall Israel's last ground incursion into Gaza in 2009. Operation Cast Lead was also conceived as a limited operation targeting Hamas missile and tunnels. Israel's three week campaign diminished at least temporarily Hamas' capabilities, but it also reportedly resulted in nearly 900 Palestinian dead.

In the aftermath of Cast Lead, Israel spent a year focused on damage control related to the United Nations Goldstone Commission, the international investigation into alleged commission of human rights violations. Most controversially, the Goldstone Report accused the Israeli government of "deliberately targeting civilians" during the war. Two years later, Goldstone publicly retracted the accusation, but the damage was already done.

Few of Israel's critics recognize, as Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu noted bitterly, that while Israel uses missiles (i.e., Iron Dome) to protect its people, Hamas uses people to defend its missiles. Still, if Israel stumbles in its ground invasion, Hamas could be bolstered.

Since the popular military coup that deposed the Muslim Brotherhood government of Mohamed Morsi last year, the Egyptian army has shut the land border between Egypt and Gaza, destroying or blocking some 2,000 entrances to tunnels that linked Palestinians with Egypt. These tunnels provided Gazans with food and fuel, and Hamas with arms and cash. As a result of the closures, Palestinian income has plummeted, economic growth has stalled, and popular support for Hamas has declined.

Nor has Hamas been able to deliver political hope to its Gazan constituents. The May reconciliation agreement with the Palestinian Authority government led by Mahmoud Abbas -- which provided the organization with little tangible gain -- is on the verge of collapse. Hamas has still not been able to secure the payment of nearly 40,000 of its employees in Gaza.

Worst of all for Hamas, the organization has not been able to inflict any significant damage on, or casualties to Israel. Taken together, these facts show that prior to the incursion, Hamas appeared to be losing relevance and legitimacy. But Israel's land invasion risks restoring both. And even President Obama Friday issued a not-so-subtle warning: "The United States and our friends and allies are deeply concerned about the risks of escalation and the loss of more innocent life."

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