

Boots on the Ground: Israel Enters Gaza

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Brief Analysis

Israel's ground operations and objectives are limited for now, but the IDF is ready to expand the mission if Hamas chooses to prolong the faceoff and continue firing rockets.

After ten days of air, naval, and standoff fire, Israel has now begun a ground operation against Hamas and other Gaza-based militant groups, signaling the second phase of Operation Protective Edge. There are clear military objectives for this limited ground maneuver, namely eliminating Hamas's vast network of underground tunnels into Israel and degrading the group's ability to launch longer-range rockets from northern Gaza. Yet the larger purpose of this second phase is political -- to show Hamas that Israel is not deterred by the prospect of a ground war inside Gaza, and that the level of pain inflicted on the group will increase exponentially so long as it refuses to come to terms on a ceasefire agreement.

HAMAS REJECTS "QUIET FOR QUIET"

Beginning in late June, Hamas joined with other militant groups in ratcheting up rocket fire from Gaza against population centers in southern Israel. The Israeli government responded with restraint, signaling its willingness to return to the "quiet for quiet" understanding that had largely remained in effect since the previous major escalation in November 2012.

Even as late as July 11, three days into Operation Protective Edge, Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu described the objective of the military action as "return[ing] quiet to the citizens of Israel." He made no commitment to embark on a more expansive campaign to destroy Hamas military capabilities in Gaza, as called for by certain right-wing

cabinet ministers. Yet Hamas responded by increasing its rocket fire, despite appeals for restraint from its political wing.

HAMAS REJECTS EGYPTIAN CEASEFIRE PLAN

On July 14, the Egyptian Foreign Ministry announced a proposal entailing an immediate cessation of hostilities and a vague commitment to reopen border crossings into Gaza. Hamas and Israel were then to send delegations to Cairo for continued talks "on other issues, including security issues." Israel accepted the proposal, then held its fire for several hours the following day.

Yet Hamas appeared divided on the proposal from the outset. Senior official Ismail Haniyeh gave a harried speech from his Gaza bunker indicating his interest in accepting the terms, stating that he was not against "calming the situation down or returning to [past] ceasefire agreements." A few hours later, however, the Hamas military wing officially rejected the plan, calling the terms "a surrender."

ONGOING MEDIATION

Mediation efforts have continued this week, including a UN-brokered five-hour "humanitarian truce" on July 17 that both Israel and Hamas accepted, but which was violated on a number of instances by rocket fire from Gaza. Egypt remains the main mediator, though its patience with Hamas is wearing thin. Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry even took the unprecedented step of blaming the Palestinians for the continued fighting, stating, "Had Hamas accepted the Egyptian proposal, it could have saved the lives of at least forty Palestinians."

Hamas is now attempting to bring in Qatar and Turkey as additional mediators, in the belief that they are less hostile to the group's agenda. Meanwhile, Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas traveled to Cairo, where he met with a senior Hamas official, and to Istanbul, where he was expected to meet with Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. According to press reports, Egyptian president Abdul Fattah al-Sisi and unnamed Israeli officials support some kind of role for the PA in Gaza as a means to end the fighting and secure the border crossings.

At this point it is unclear what Hamas's actual demands are, since the group has yet to issue an official statement regarding its conditions for ending the conflict. The various sporadic demands floated in the press over the past week have vacillated widely, and most are unlikely to be met by Israel or Egypt. The only seemingly consistent demand is for easing the blockade around Gaza, yet the question remains how far-reaching such concessions by Egypt and Israel would be, and what Hamas is willing to give up in return. Having started this round of fighting, the group is now desperate to show some tangible gain, and so it continues negotiating via the rocket.

MILITARY DIMENSIONS OF THE GROUND OPERATION

The operation begun on the night of July 17 is the largest Israeli ground action since Operation Cast Lead in 2009. Although at this point it remains a limited incursion with limited objectives, Israel is clearly prepared in a military sense to expand it as necessary. The current objectives are to eliminate the tunnel infrastructure around the border, destroy rocket launching forces/infrastructure in the area of operations, and inflict losses on hostile ground combat elements.

Israeli ground forces appear to be operating on three main axes: southern, central, and northern. The incursions are unlikely to extend into the major population centers, instead focusing on border areas a kilometer or two into the coastal territory. Air and naval forces, for their part, will continue their operations against military infrastructure throughout Gaza and in support of ground incursions. In short, the coastal territory is very much being squeezed from all directions.

The Israeli task force involved in the operation appears to be approximately division size at this stage, with perhaps 15,000-20,000 men comprising one regular armored brigade, three regular infantry brigades, combat engineers

(probably including specialist counter-tunnel units), combat intelligence corps units, and field artillery units providing support from inside Israel. Other armor and infantry units are likely being held in reserve to respond to contingencies or expand the operation if ordered.

Hamas and the other Palestinian groups with ground forces have promised strong resistance, but they will be cautious and probably try to avoid large-scale direct engagements with the Israel Defense Forces, as they did during Cast Lead. Early reports indicate only limited resistance. At the same time, they will attempt to keep firing rockets into Israel to demonstrate their own sustainability and the "futility" of the Israeli operation. They will also likely engage the IDF inside Gaza with long-range fire from antitank missiles and mortars. And they will almost certainly seek a high-profile success, such as the kidnapping of an Israeli soldier or an action involving significant IDF casualties. All of this will, of course, be accompanied by the usual propagandistic claims of military victories and heavy Israeli losses.

In light of these factors, most of the direct combat is likely to be small-scale actions involving small numbers of forces on both sides and long-range exchanges of fire. The IDF will employ heavy firepower against identified targets, albeit with awareness regarding the risks of collateral damage. Israel will also likely escalate its standoff fire -- from tanks, artillery, and aircraft -- with the aim of suppressing and destroying long-range rockets in northern Gaza, in and around Beit Lahiyah.

IMPLICATIONS

The current operation is the first, but not necessarily the last, phase of Israeli ground operations. The prime minister and defense minister have ordered the IDF to prepare for "a major expansion of the ground operation," and adequate forces for a much larger campaign have been readied.

Israel will develop more intelligence and targets as the operation continues, and this may lead to some expansion in its own right. Furthermore, targets of opportunity will develop as hostile groups expose their forces and command structures while countering Israeli forces. Casualties will increase for both sides, but probably disproportionately for the Palestinians because of IDF operational and tactical advantages. During the ground phase of Cast Lead, the IDF suffered only ten killed in action, and four of those were by friendly fire. At this point, according to Israeli sources, nineteen Palestinian combatants and one IDF soldier have been killed. Few civilian casualties have been reported in connection with the operation.

Palestinian militants will likely keep fighting during the initial onslaught, attempting to achieve a signal success but without exposing their forces to large-scale destruction. During Cast Lead, Hamas fighters under heavy Israeli pressure pulled back from the border and into heavily populated urban areas, engaging IDF ground forces only to give the appearance of a defense.

From a technical military sense, Israel is likely to achieve at least some success in meeting its objectives. Damage will be done to the tunnel and rocket infrastructure, and casualties will be inflicted on militant forces. As mentioned previously, however, the main objective is political. On the psychological level, the operation aims to show Hamas that Israel is not deterred from a potentially messy ground operation inside Gaza, despite the risk of casualties to its own forces. It also signals that the pain inflicted on Hamas will increase so long as the fighting continues and the group fails to come to terms.

Although the operation may in fact compel Hamas to enter more serious negotiations, the group might also see ground incursions as an opportunity to entangle the IDF in prolonged, indecisive fighting -- that is, a conflict in which Israeli military and Palestinian civilian casualties increase while rocket fire continues to target Israeli population centers. Such a scenario would set the stage for a critical Israeli decision on whether to expand the operation. As it has been from the beginning, the end to this latest round of fighting -- and the welfare of the Gazan

people -- is in Hamas's hands.

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