

Gaza Air Strikes Are a Necessary Show of Force for Israel

by [Michael Herzog \(/experts/michael-herzog\)](/experts/michael-herzog)

Jul 10, 2014

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Michael Herzog \(/experts/michael-herzog\)](/experts/michael-herzog)

Michael Herzog was appointed Israel's ambassador to the United States in 2021. Previously, he was an international fellow at The Washington Institute.



Articles & Testimony

Hamas, bankrupt and friendless, hopes to use violence to win support. Israel cannot do otherwise than act.

It may sound like the refrain of a sad, familiar song. But, faced with Hamas and other armed groups in Gaza firing hundreds of rockets at it, Israel had no other choice than to launch a military operation. The immediate trigger was the abduction of three Israeli teenagers in the West Bank, for which Israel blames Hamas, whose leaders had called for kidnappings. Israel responded with pressure on Hamas's West Bank infrastructure. Hamas pushed back by allowing a massive firing of rockets from Gaza. However, as so often in the Middle East, one should look beneath the surface for the root causes.

Hamas faces an unprecedented economic and political crisis. The Egyptian government regards it as an enemy, has clamped down on smuggling activity, and kept the Rafah border crossing mostly closed. It has lost its Syrian base and Iranian support as a result of the Syrian civil war. Now its authority is weakening inside Gaza: it is on the point of bankruptcy and has been challenged by jihadist groups buoyed up by the success of Isis.

Hamas's political leadership hoped that reconciliation with the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank would be its salvation. It intended to pass on the burden of Gaza's daily governance, while maintaining overall control and independent armed forces. But the PA refused to pick up the tab for Hamas's 40,000 "employees" and Egypt has kept up its pressure. It appears that Hamas's military wing therefore decided to escalate the conflict with Israel in order to improve the movement's position.

Betting on Israel's reluctance to invade Gaza, Hamas wants to demonstrate "resistance" to Israeli pressure and show off its capabilities, including long-range rockets and offensive operations using naval commandos and tunnels. Yet not only have these attempts so far been thwarted, but Hamas seems to have miscalculated yet again. Israel does not tolerate such barrages for long.

Israel's goal is to re-establish a ceasefire that is as stable and long as possible, without rewarding Hamas for violence.

To this end its air force is targeting underground launchers, heavy rockets, offensive tunnels and command and control structures, including commanders themselves. By degrading the capacity and motivation of Hamas and other armed groups, it hopes to coerce Hamas to accept a ceasefire and enforce it.

To some in Israel this is too soft, since it can only secure a temporary ceasefire. However, the alternative seems even less desirable. A conquest of Gaza, followed by a lengthy operation to clean up terror infrastructure, would prove costly in human lives on both sides, and divert attention from other regional threats, including Sunni jihadists and Iran's nuclear programme. It could also result in the collapse of Hamas rule and total chaos -- an even worse prospect.

Regrettably, there are innocent Palestinian casualties. But those who blame the casualties on "disproportionate" Israeli actions must suggest what would be a "proportionate" response to hundreds of rockets deliberately and continuously targeting Israeli civilians. Should the fact that the groups firing these rockets use Palestinian civilians as human shields provide them with impunity? Should the fact that Israel has exceptional home-front defences dictate complacency, even as millions rush to shelters daily? Israel takes extensive measures to avoid civilian casualties, warning occupants of targeted buildings with phone calls and leaflets. Meanwhile, Palestinian leaders fail to condemn the targeting of Israeli civilians.

So how will this end? Hamas's weakness and the lack of an effective mediating mechanism between the parties may prolong the confrontation. While a ground operation in Gaza is not Israel's desire, it may ultimately feel compelled to launch one should the air strikes not work or Hamas manage to inflict painful casualties. In such a scenario Israel's goal would likely be to destroy Hamas's heavier military capabilities. Given the deep crisis facing Hamas and Egypt's pressure on the border, it could prove extremely challenging for Hamas to then rebuild.

The PA is marginalised by the current conflict, its reconciliation deal with Hamas looking increasingly irrelevant. As a result there is no escape from the conclusion that, ultimately, only a true unity deal -- that allows moderate Palestinians to assume real control over Gaza -- can stop this sad song being played again and again.

Brig. Gen. Michael Herzog, IDF (Ret.), is The Washington Institute's Milton Fine International Fellow and a longtime Israeli peace negotiator and defense official. ❖

Guardian

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

Peace Process (/policy-analysis/peace-process)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Israel (/policy-analysis/israel)

Palestinians (/policy-analysis/palestinians)