

# The More Things Change

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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## Advances in Israeli weaponry haven't led to advances in Israeli strategy.

**A**fter almost four years of cyclical escalation and de-escalation in the Gaza Strip, Israel and Hamas are at it again. And with both sides having conducted hundreds of airstrikes and rocket strikes against one another in the last six days, a major battle on the ground in Gaza is likely if diplomacy fails.

But despite years of preparation on both sides and the introduction of new technologies -- Hamas's long-range rockets and Israel's Iron Dome missile defense system, in particular -- the parameters of the conflict remain essentially unchanged. Israel has broadened its target set inside Gaza, while Hamas has widened the geographic scope of its operations to include the Tel Aviv and Jerusalem areas. But with preparations for a ground invasion currently underway, Operation Pillar of Defense could very well evolve into a "Cast Lead" redux.

Indeed, intelligence collection and operational planning for this offensive have been underway virtually since the end of Operation Cast Lead in January 2009, as have the development of doctrine and the readying and training of specific forces. Israeli objectives in this operation also closely mirror those of Cast Lead -- in particular, reducing rocket threats to southern, and now central, Israel; damaging the military capabilities of Hamas and other armed groups in Gaza; and restoring Israel's ability to deter attacks from Palestinian forces in Gaza.

Unlike Operation Cast Lead, however, Israel's defensive operations now form a major part of its response to the Gaza based threat. In addition to civil defense exercises and the national attack warning system, both leveraged in 2009, Israel now boasts the Iron Dome counter rocket system, which has successfully intercepted as many as 90 percent of rockets deemed a threat to targets inside Israel, according to the government.

Still, the centerpiece of Israel's operation in Gaza has been a comprehensive aerial attack on multiple target sets within Gaza. The air operation, which began on Nov. 14, has been directed at military targets and Hamas associated infrastructure. Based on the relatively low number of Palestinian casualties -- roughly 110 killed, including both civilians and fighters -- in the first six days, the strikes seem to have been relatively precise. Israel has also used

leaflet drops to provide warning to civilians.

Preparations for a ground operation in Gaza are well advanced and could probably be conducted on very short notice. Elements of several brigades are in the border area, including two high-quality regular infantry brigades (Paratroop Brigade and Givati Infantry Brigade), the 401st Armored Brigade, and perhaps another armored brigade. The Gaza Territorial Division, which is normally responsible for security along the Gaza border, is likely being reinforced with additional reservists, combat units, artillery, and engineers. Israel has mobilized perhaps 16,000 reservists, and is prepared to mobilize as many as 75,000. This would give the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) the capability to launch a multi-division scale offensive in Gaza.

Meanwhile, Hamas' armed wing, the Ezzedeen al-Qassam Brigades (EQB), and other armed groups in Gaza, such as Palestinian Islamic Jihad and the Popular Resistance Committees, continue to fire rockets into Israel and will likely take part in any ground battle that ensues. In addition to avenging the killing of Ahmad Jabari, Hamas' military commander, Hamas seeks to compel Israel to stop its air campaign, deter an Israeli ground operation, and demonstrate active "resistance" against Israel. In addition, Hamas wants to prove that, regardless of Israel's actions, it can continue to threaten the Jewish state with rockets, a capacity that Israel will have difficulty completely eliminating.

The EQB and other armed groups are using a variety of weapons to strike Israel. In this conflict they have introduced for the first time in battle the Iranian Fajr-5 rocket, which has a 175 kilogram warhead and a range of 75 kilometers. The EQB also claims to have produced an "M75" rocket of similar range, possibly a copy or derivative of the Fajr-5. How many of these long-range weapons the armed groups have is unknown. Some have already been fired and Israel claims to have destroyed many others in air attacks. Also new to this round of fighting is the extensive use of multiple rocket launchers, deployed both on the ground and on trucks. This is an attempt by the EQB and others to increase the rate of rocket fire, probably to saturate the Iron Dome system. The EQB is also using a variety of mortars to fire on targets close to the border, as they did in 2009 and in subsequent clashes with Israel.

Hamas also claims to be using shoulder fired surface-to-air missiles, likely acquired from Libya, to engage Israeli aircraft. This would be a tactical improvement since 2009. The EQB even says it has downed Israeli aircraft in recent days, but nothing has been officially confirmed. The IDF did carry out a targeted killing of Mohammed Kaleb, Hamas's head of air defense, suggesting that it takes this threat seriously.

Little is known about current Hamas readiness for an Israeli ground incursion, but history suggests that they are at least somewhat prepared. After the failures of the last war, Hamas has devoted substantial resources to improving the EQB's combat readiness through better training and newer weapons. They are now thought to have sophisticated anti-tank guided missiles (the Russian designed Coronet) and rocket propelled grenades (RPG-29 and RPG-7 with tandem warheads). This represents a potentially significant upgrade of their combat capabilities from the last war. Of course, these capabilities have yet to be tested in battle.

Nonetheless, Hamas and the other groups are probably approaching the limit of their ability to strike Israel. They may still be able to fire at high volume for short periods, but it is likely that the overall number of rockets fired will decrease as stocks are depleted, the rocket logistical system is disrupted, and launch crews are killed and wounded. Daily totals have already begun to slip significantly. Hamas will likely try to keep firing -- even at reduced capacity -- and shoot off small numbers of long-range rockets aimed at Tel Aviv and perhaps Jerusalem. It also promises operational "surprises." Still, Hamas' best hope is that a ceasefire will end the exchange of strikes before it runs out of rockets or Israel launches a ground attack. That would constitute at least a qualified victory for Hamas.

Failing a ceasefire, it is likely that the conflict will escalate into something resembling Operation Cast Lead. Continuing rocket fire, even if at lower levels of intensity, will push the Israeli government toward ground operations

in Gaza. In this event, Israel may not be satisfied with simply ending rocket fire. It may well attempt to inflict a much more punishing blow against Hamas and its political and military structure in Gaza, all the more so because a majority of Israelis appear to support an expansion of the war. To strike a lasting blow at Hamas, however, Israel will have to mount a substantial ground offensive inside Gaza and maintain it long enough to destroy Hamas' facilities and forces. Still, it would be virtually impossible for Israel to permanently eliminate Hamas' military capability, meaning that we could be looking at yet another iteration of this conflict a few years from now.

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