

Tension with Gaza: Israel's Deterrence under Pressure

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Jan 4, 2011

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Brief Analysis

In December 2010, violence increased significantly along Israel's border with Gaza, manifest by high-trajectory fire (rockets and mortars) on southern Israel, counterstrikes by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), and clashes along the border security fence. The Gaza situation since the end of Israel's Operation Cast Lead in January 2009 has been characterized by similar periods of increased violence and tension. Although these episodes have not produced major hostilities, the deterrence established by Cast Lead is decaying over time. Neither Hamas nor Israel may be seeking another round of serious fighting, but the potential for such fighting has nonetheless grown.

Military and Political Dynamics

Periods of increased tensions related to Gaza are not a new phenomenon (see [PolicyWatch #1648 \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=3193\)](#)), and last month's case was serious.

Overall, the situation is driven by both military and political processes that could propel the violence to higher levels.

On the military side, rocket and mortar fire from within Gaza elicits retaliatory strikes from the Israelis at various levels of intensity. The mid-December attacks, for their part, prompted a series of Israeli Air Force (IAF) actions on December 21 against multiple targets within Gaza -- the most intense such actions since Cast Lead. As a rule, Israeli counterstrikes lead to additional attacks by terrorist elements from within Gaza, and actions by both sides tend to be more serious when casualties have been incurred. For example, when five Palestinian terrorists were killed by the IAF on December 19 as they prepared to launch rockets into Israel, the Palestinians responded with rocket and mortar strikes into southern Israel. This attack/retaliatory-attack dynamic, and the effects of specific incidents, can result in escalation.

A second military challenge relating to Gaza involves the struggle for dominance of the border zone, a situation that also intensified in December. The general picture entails Palestinian groups, including Hamas, attempting to advance their activity to the fence, while Israel seeks to control an area up to several hundred meters inside the Gaza Strip to prevent the approach of terrorist elements to the border. This contest produces incidents and casualties, usually Palestinian, on a regular basis.

Various weapons and tactics are employed by Palestinians in the border struggle, including antitank weapons, improvised explosive devices, mortars, small arms, and sniper fire. According to the IDF, terrorists sometimes use

civilian activity in or near the border zone as cover for armed elements to approach the security fence; Palestinian civilians are sometimes killed and wounded as a result. The tools used by Israel, meanwhile, include infantry and armored quick-reaction forces, heavy machine guns, tanks, drones, attack helicopters, and aircraft. The combination of armed Palestinians attempting to operate in the security zone and a high degree of readiness by the IDF to prevent such activity generates the clashes. The IDF rotates personnel from its best infantry and armored brigades for duty along the Gaza border, and these units are primarily involved in the ground clashes.

A third military component of the Gaza border conflict involves the increasing capabilities of the Palestinian terrorist groups, as evidenced in large part by their acquisition of new and more weapons. Since Cast Lead, terrorist groups have obtained long-range rockets including the Iranian-designed Fajr-5 (with a range of 70 km), as well as large numbers of shorter-range rockets. On December 6, 2010, an AT-5 Kornet antitank guided missile was employed by Palestinians for the first time in the Gaza conflict. The missile hit and penetrated the armor of an Israeli Merkava tank. Terrorists in Gaza are also reportedly receiving anti-aircraft weapons, including man-portable surface-to-air missiles (SAMs). Several shipments of SAMs bound for Gaza have reportedly been discovered by the Egyptians in the Sinai. These new weapons may be boosting the confidence of armed elements in Gaza, and the repetitive nature of Israeli counteroperations may be hardening them to routine IDF action. On the whole, enhanced capabilities raise the stakes in military actions. Longer-range rockets and more rockets mean a greater proportion of Israelis at risk, and Kornet missiles increase the danger to IDF forces operating along the border. The consequences may apply not only to tanks and other armored vehicles but also to fixed positions and potentially to civilian transportation, agricultural activity, and settlements within five kilometers of the border.

Political dynamics on both sides could also undermine deterrence. For Hamas, processes between the military and political wings and so-called hardliners and moderates play out in often opaque ways. The movement must accommodate pressures for military action from within, and the results of such pressures can influence power dynamics within the group. Hamas must also deal with other Gaza terrorist organizations, including more or less like-minded groups such as the Palestinian Resistance Committees and Islamic Jihad and dissenters such as Jaish al-Islam. And Hamas must consider its position vis-a-vis the Palestinian Authority (PA). On a fundamental level, Hamas uses its claim as a "resistance" movement intent on liberating all the Occupied Territories to distinguish itself from the PA. A failure to demonstrate active resistance weakens its claim to be a meaningful alternative. For its part, the Israeli government also faces political pressure to act in the face of attacks from Gaza. Residents of the south feel threatened, and their political representatives advocate taking strong action in response.

Challenges for Hamas and Israel

Hamas and Israel face challenges in maintaining stability both in the current situation and for the future. The IDF assesses that Hamas currently wants to concentrate on internal matters in Gaza and building its political and military strength rather than becoming involved in open warfare with Israel -- and Hamas seems to be acting in line with such an assessment. Yet the multiplicity of armed actors within Gaza and their complex relationships with Hamas make this process difficult to undertake with complete assurance. Hamas appears to be responding to the challenge by suppressing some rocket and mortar fire, while permitting various groups to carry out actions along the security fence. Hamas has also been engaged in the rhetoric of resistance. The Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, the military wing of Hamas, has been celebrating the concurrent twenty-third anniversary of the founding of the movement and the second anniversary of the Battle of the Criterion (Hamas's name for the 2008-2009 conflict with Israel) with numerous statements, displays, and publications celebrating its past accomplishments and signaling readiness for renewed battle.

Israel has its own challenges. It must preserve relative quiet in the south for the Israeli population, minimize Israeli civilian and military casualties, dominate the border zone, and control escalation when incidents occur. Enhanced

defensive measures can help in these endeavors. Reportedly, Israel deployed the Raz counterrocket radar system to the Gaza area during the latest escalation, will utilize Merkava IV tanks with active protection systems along the border, and is implementing other counterinfiltration and defensive measures. Israeli air and ground units operating near Gaza will also modify tactics in accordance with the threat from anti-aircraft and anti-tank systems in order to reduce exposure and risk. Nevertheless, the primary means of preventing attacks is through maintenance and periodic reinforcement of deterrence by applying threats and limited and controlled military power. This is a continuous and demanding process in a highly dynamic environment. Effective deterrence is not achieved at once, or forever, or without risk of escalation.

Conclusions

Over time, deterrence in the Gaza situation will likely fail. Deterrence works best in essentially stable situations, wherein the sides clearly understand each other's calculus. Gaza is highly dynamic, with many actors with different motivations and numerous connections and linkages. Hamas cannot, or will not, control all the high-trajectory fire from Gaza or all the incidents along the border fence, and such a reality will keep alive the chances of a serious incident that produces escalation.

The military capabilities of the Qassam Brigades and other organizations have increased, perhaps making them more confident as well as more dangerous. This may lead to sharper fighting along the buffer zone -- and inevitably to more casualties, including IDF -- along with increased pressure on the IDF to respond with greater force.

Retaliatory bombing by the IDF does not seem to have a lasting effect, as the targets (tunnels, arms manufacturing and storage facilities, and other installations and activities) are not critical. The Qassam Brigades and others are used to being bombed, and maintaining deterrence will require stronger measures. Enforcing a kind of comprehensive deterrence is likely to be an upward -- or downward -- spiral for the IDF. Such enforcement requires holding Hamas accountable for all violent incidents from Gaza, an approach that is problematic given the dynamics of the situation and echoes past IDF efforts to "find the address" for border infiltration and terrorism.

A spiral of violence would most likely have the following features: an increase in rocket and mortar fire over time with a mounting response by the IDF, more serious and more numerous clashes in the buffer zone and along the fence, increased military and civilian casualties on both sides, and perhaps a change in the character of incidents, which could include serious Palestinian attempts to penetrate the border and kidnapping operations, and IDF strikes against leadership targets in Gaza.

Keeping the situation stable under such escalated circumstances will be very difficult, even if Hamas and Israel wish to avoid a major conflict. This latest flare-up may have ended, but sometime ahead a major IDF operation to address the threat seems likely.

Jeffrey White is a defense fellow at The Washington Institute, specializing in Arab-Israeli military and security affairs. ❖

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